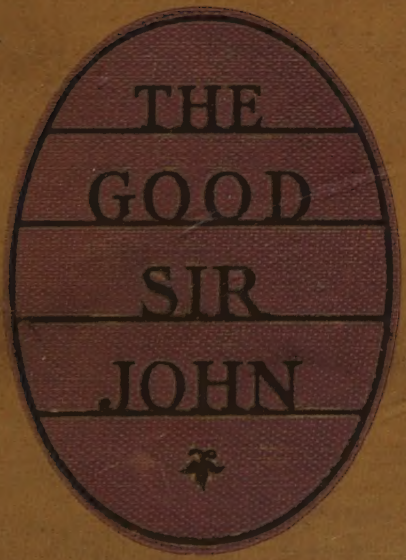
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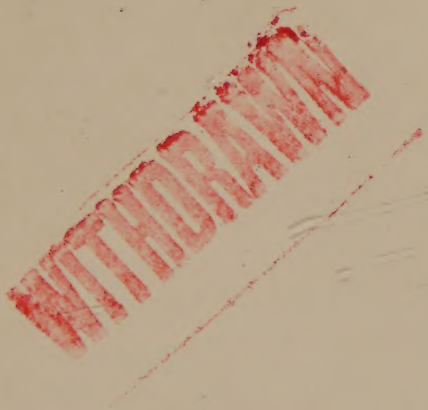

The Good Sir John

The good SIR JOHN

PHOEBE
FENWICK
GAYE

NEW YORK
HORACE LIVERIGHT

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MANUFACTURED IN THE U. S. A.

First printing, September, 1930
Second printing, September, 1930

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THE RISE AND FALL OF SIR JOHN FALSTAFF KNIGHT

1343-1415

Chapter I

Infancy

I

Calote was binding in the farthest of all the fields of Gramercy when the first warning pangs came upon her. She had just had her midday meal of coarse bread and onions, with the other binders, and was still on her first sheaf. She had stopped, with her hand to her heart, suspicious of unusual indigestion, then she had dropped the sheaf she was holding, and had run for the road, stumbling as she went, meaning to make for the shelter of the nearest hut. The other binders and stookers straightened their tired backs, and stared after her, glad of the smallest respite from their work. They had been at it since five that morning, and now high noon and the heat of the day weighed upon them. They followed her clumsy running figure with their wrinkled-up eyes, until the shimmering haze from the unreaped field rose round her like mist, then they bent to their work again. The men stooked methodically. The steadier they worked, the sooner it would be over. Life and its continual reproduction was too every-

day an affair to interest them, but the women binders shouted to each other across the field:

"Calote's been taken!"

And after that they bound their sheaves in closer conjunction, talking even while they held the withes between their strong teeth, preparatory to binding. Calote and her affairs would do to while away the tedium of the afternoon.

Except for the women's voices, and the continual small humming of flies, an incredible stillness hung over the yellow earth. This was the consummation of their spring sowing, and, in spite of their weariness, the workers were filled with a sweet contentment. After this field, one more remained. Then all would be reaped, bound and stooked. Winter, despite certain terrible accompaniments, would not hold the supreme terror of hunger. The sky was the blue shade of the cloak that God's Mother wore. Surely She would keep Her cloak outspread, now, and let no rain fall, until they had loaded their haywains, and gathered the grain into the barns. The harvest indeed was everything — the men and women who harvested were nothing, mere servants of a sacred rite. They reaped, they bound into sheaves, they stacked the sheaves, they loaded the wagons, they garnered into barns. It was not the grain which served them, but they who served the grain, and the proud heads of wheat and rye, so lately sacrificed, would be resurrected again next year. When the sun went down, and the cold of an early autumn evening rushed upon them, they would leave the fields, and return to the village, stumbling with exhaustion on the uneven rutted road, as Calote

had stumbled, in her wild exit from the harvesting. It was a long way home. . . .

The manor of Gramercy lay in Yorkshire. One of William the Conqueror's many Norman friends had been presented with the land, as a mark of favour, and had set to and built the manor from which it took its name. Out of gratitude he called it Gramercy. The little church had appeared inevitably, scarcely a stone's throw from the house, and the Norman baron's wife was buried in it. He himself, poor man, had gone on some holy pilgrimage, and had been killed in a skirmish on the steps of a cathedral. Nobody remembered him, or anything about him, and King William had given Gramercy to someone else. Since then it had known many masters — but the servants, being nearer to the soil, were not so easily uprooted and transplanted. Seedtime and harvest might pass, but they would still be there, and lords of the manor might come and go. It made no difference to them. They had no more than a mild interest in their overlord, and accepted him as they accepted less pleasant aspects of the weather with humble resignation. Whoever he might be, he was always the same in certain characteristics; as sudden in his appearances as a comet, as destructive to their crops as a hurricane, as terrible in action as thunder and lightning. Well, since God and His church would have it so, it was really not so bad, and certainly their present lord, Sir William Falstaff, gave them very little trouble. He had burst in on them in the depths of last winter, true, at a time when no sane man moved more than a furlong from his own fireside, and he and his re-

tainers had stayed a week, and eaten enough for an army. And his friend Lemoine had come to see him, and stayed three days, and *his* retainers all had good appetites, too. As for them, they had spent their Christmas in the manor forest, some hacking and hewing down the tough oaks, while others held lanterns to keep off the wild beasts, and then on the silvery-crusted roads, dragging home their labour, while their numbed hands lost feeling even to the rope which slipped like fire between their fingers, and their painful gasping breath crystallized into drops of dew in the translucent iciness about them. The wood was to feed the blazing fire at the manor, that would never go out so long as their lord remained. When the new year was two days old, he had left again for the south, and they had crept back into their huts, to sleep the cold weather away. The priest told them that Sir William had another manor, in a place called Gloucestershire, where he and his lady lived. With luck they might be left unmolested now, until another spring had passed. The bailiff of Gramercy was a kindly man and fair in his dealings with them, in his lord's absence. The summer had been good, and now the harvest was all but in. *Gloria in excelsis.*

And in the heat of the hot September afternoon, while her companions were still working in the field, Calote gave birth to a son, in the first cottage in the village. The old beldam, who had woken from her dozing to attend to the needs of a new life, washed the child, and shook him. The first faint cry was feeble enough, like all first cries, but as the lungs filled, and half-unconscious consciousness of

life began, the cry grew to a wail, and the wail to a yell, so that even the fowls, rooting and scratching in the dirty straw that carpeted the hut, ducked their heads as if to avoid a blow, and helter-skeltered out at the open doorway.

"There's a Johnny-Raw for you!" said the old woman, meaning, "What a beginning to make!"

"Johnny . . ." echoed his mother weakly, and fell asleep where she lay, among the straw.

FOURTEENTH CENTURY England is a tapestry: its background is the green of grass and of trees, moving a little, as the wind moves them. On its surface are groups of men and women, dressed in peacock hues, suggesting, by the angular graciousness of head and hand, the business they were engaged upon. If we stand too close to this picture, the lack of any kind of perspective, and the bewildering diversity of colour and posture, blur the mind's eye to any tranquil comprehension of it, but as we move backwards and away, so individuals and events fall into place, and we are able to perceive by the very position and repetition of certain threads the intrinsic character of the whole. Here and there it is worn and faded, like the memory of man, and here and there, where History has seized upon it, its very clarity of outline declares that it was woven only yesterday.

And as, in Holy pictures, the central figure is the King of Heaven, so here the central figure is the King of England. He looms largest and clearest,

as if his very importance had swelled him out. Round about him, like the angels and archangels, are his spiritual and temporal counsellors, bishops and archbishops, priests and prelates. They incline towards him, their splendid vestments and rare jewels reflecting — like reflected glory — the glimmer and glitter of majesty. And though their eyes may look earthwards in humble contemplation, or heavenwards in pious ejaculation, there is always an intent 'ware look about them, for their *real* overlord is over the sea, either in Rome or in Avignon, and nobody is quite sure which Pope is blessed of Heaven. Pressing around the ecclesiastics, and sometimes edging between them to get a word with the King, are his great lords and relatives, gorgeously, expensively arrayed in velvet and fine linen, ablaze with all the colours of the rainbow, and sullenly suspicious of the Church's influence on the King. They have ridden in from the great castles and estates of England to confer together, and they are bluff and cursory of speech, despising intelligent conversation as fit only for clerks. Their pennons and their shields accompany them, and the proud names of counties float over their cropped heads. Their heyday has passed, and from now on the Hundred Years' War divides their ranks into the divisions of French and English blood, and the devastating track that the Black Death leaves behind it robs their rich estates of both villeins and incomes. Alas, pity the poor baron! What with the demands of Church and King, his favourite pastime of war is becoming too expensive for him. Even ransoms will not eke it out.

Behind the barons come the knights and squires, with sometimes an influential lady squeezed in between, her high headdress towering like the spire of a church amongst the squat headdresses of the men. Sometimes she is fit to present at court, and sometimes she is not, and it is unfortunate when she is not, because then the court must revolve round *her,* and even the King does her will.

And behind the squires, who are hardworking, earnest men, full of ambition, come the pages, who are not ambitious at all, but inclined to idleness, and the mischief that idleness breeds. They are young and rosy, and well-fed, and they are the last persons on the fringe of the court, circling it like small cherubim and seraphim, but more like little devils within. That is the centrepiece of the tapestry, and there is a green space round it, like the green fields which separate London and Westminster from the surrounding counties. On the sparse roads which lead to other towns, people may be seen travelling on horseback or in litter, but always in companies on the less frequented ways, for fear of robbers or wild beasts hidden in the swamps and forests which line the roads.

Colour is rampant everywhere: there is gold in the silken hair of ladies and pages, and in the King's crown. There is gold in girdles, and bridles, and sword-hilts and armour. There is gold in the dinner service and golden goblets to drink from in the King's palace. But there is never much gold in his exchequer, for most of the gold has gone, in a long and glittering stream, into the coffers of the Pope. There is silver in shields and in armour, and

in the stirrups of horses. There is silver in the beards of old men. And there is silver still, in the coffers of the barons, and they are growing more and more careful of it, and less and less eager to hand it out. There is silver too, in the coffers of the great merchants, English and Hanseatic and Venetian. There is silver hidden away in Jews' houses, for they have not forgotten Richard-Cœur-de-Lion yet, and are rightly cautious. There is silver in the tears of maids betrayed, of wives soon made widows, of old women who cry for the world which was so perfect when they were young. . . . Scarlet threads wind across the tapestry like thin trails of blood. The mouths of great ladies are like full-blown poppies, ripe and inviting. So are the mouths of the little pages, and the young squires. There is a more sinister scarlet which comes crawling out between the crevices in armour, when horse and rider lie stiffly at rest, their limbs already composed as models for memorials. There is scarlet in the flying pennons, and in the standards, in the saddles and bridles of the great horses, in the silk of royal tents. There is a scarlet even in the sea, floating on the surface like oil, between clumsy little ships like wounded seabirds, trailing their broken-masted sails like wings in the rough waters. . . .

And the blue of the Channel when it is calm is the same blue as the blue in the eyes of the beautiful young knights, serene and sapphire. There is a blue velvet like midnight, heavily embroidered, worn at court and in castles. There is a dull blue serge for the serving men. There is a regal purple, exclusively royal and ecclesiastic, trailing carelessly from the

King's throne or saddle, or from the seats and saddles of archbishops. There is a flaunting yellow, favoured by the merchants and by the gay wives of Cheap Side. There is a saffron silk for fine ladies, of such a texture that an ell of it can be squeezed through the smallest ring. There is a humble brown, the colour of fallow earth, worn by poor priests and journeymen, and tillers of the soil. There is every colour and every shade, and there is white in the Pope's gloves and in the ermine of the King, and in the skin of his favourite palfrey. There is black in the armour of the Black Prince, in hair, and horses' skins, and in the hooded robes of Dominican monks and of their sisters in the Lord.

The ladies' faces are pale from living indoors with windows tightly closed, for the day has gone by when womenfolk accompanied their men to war. War is too dangerous nowadays. The men are sunburnt from continual exposure. The children are puny, squeezed on to the tapestry as a last thought, just as they squeezed and edged their little lives out of too arduous a sphere of existence. Their faces are not childish, but aged, wizened, like the monkeys that are brought from Naples to amuse the court.

And behind the small figures loom the great buildings: the tall cathedrals, beautiful in every arch and angle, a voiceless praise that reaches up continually to God; the castles, sturdy, squat, and self-sufficient, wardens of Welsh and Scottish marches; the palaces in every shape and style, small, select, with serpentine pillars and inlaid floors; the hovels, crowded and filthy, one-roomed; the merchants' houses, built like the inns, round three corners of a

square, with a cobbled space before them. Here are towns already overcrowded, and villages so few and far between that they are isolated like islands. Here is beauty and squalor, cruelty and comradeship, starvation and surfeit. The strangest opposites here go hand-in-hand, and ignorance is cowed by fear and superstition, and a little knowledge is a dangerous thing — to those that have it not. . . . Here is a young England, newly-awake to glorious possibilities, clumsy, chivalrous, convinced of a blood-feud with France that only blood can destroy, stubborn and brave, and incredibly foolish. Here is the England that produced Will Langland and Dan Chaucer and John Wycliffe all in a lifetime — and liked the one who made them laugh most and think least, just as people do to-day. Here is England's fourteenth century.

3

WINTER passed slowly, and at last a tremulous spring, having left her flowered imprint on the southern counties, crossed the rampart of the wild moors and reached Gramercy. Calote's son throve mightily. He lived with her in her father's hut, along with her sister's progeny. It was a small dark hovel, with an earthen floor which human beings and pigs shared together as a couch at night, while a small fire of damp wood burnt steadily and smokily up through the hole in the roof. The walls of the house were of wood, stained with pitch and plugged with clay, but some of the clay had fallen out, and the resulting crevices were stuffed with rags and oddments, with any poor stuff, so that the wind

which howled outside might not come whistling through. None of the inhabitants of the village ventured out unarmed in this weather, for starving wolves had been known to roam through the village, and children had been carried off. The days were wet, and dismally dark. The nights lasted interminably. The livestock of the summer months had been killed off and salted down at Martinmas, all except a few thin pigs, subsisting on offal. Only the bailiff, up at the manor, fed his horse well, and did not kill it, and no one grudged him, poor man, because of the work he had to do, and the miles he had to cover, even in wintertime. But the rest of the village had enough to do to keep themselves and their families. There was nothing to do and nowhere to go, so like the earth and the animals in the forests the peasants slept the winter away, and the old people, whose blood moved more sluggishly in their veins, died quietly from the cold.

But Calote's Johnny would not sleep the winter away. He made himself heard and felt. And indeed it was dull, to have come so recently into this exciting world, and then to be expected to resume the nine-months' sleep again. He had no intention of doing so from the first, and he made it perfectly clear to everyone, until his grandfather began to wish he had never been born.

"When his father comes, I shall ask him to take him away," he said, and Calote answered rudely: "Do you suppose his father will do anything for you?" For it was an understood thing in the village, that the father of Calote's child was the lord of the manor himself.

Calote liked to manage her father. He was only a goatherd, and she had been milkmaid up at the manor. Indeed it was in the dairy there among the cheeses, that Sir William had first come upon her. It was a little difficult to guess why he had succumbed to her, for certainly Calote was no beauty. Perhaps it was just because she was, in every particular, the very antithesis of the lady he had left at home. She was short and sturdy, with sullen black brows and hair, and her cheeks were the colour of tomatoes. There was no delicate French "finish" about her, no gentle quality that one associated with womenfolk, but her arms and her shoulders were a dull creamy colour, thick and warm and soft, and she had a way of walking, of throwing her hips. . . . He couldn't resist her, and certainly she had had no wish to resist him. She had never been his true-love nor he hers, but she liked to manage a man, and to manage Sir William, even for so short a time, had given her intense delight. Sullen and uncommunicative by nature, she had remained sullen and uncommunicative with him, and so marked a contrast with his own garrulous pale lady could not fail to intrigue him. It was as if he had come across a strange new animal, in the course of his wanderings. He had petted and pampered her and tamed her to his will, and she had lain on soft cushions before a roaring log-fire, drawing in the unusual warmth like a cat, her black brows knitted on her creamy forehead, her short dark lashes lying quiescent, unquivering, on her crimson cheeks. . . . She recalled it sometimes even now, without regret or rancour. It was not in the nature of good times to last for ever, any more

than Gramercy could bask in a hot sun for twelve months every year, or by mere wishing avoid the winter months. Yet it had been worth while, to lord it over her own landlord, even for seven days, and now she had Johnny, with the same lordly blood in his veins. She was grimly amused at her son's arrival, and at the circumstances of his conception, and yet, too, she was proud of him. There was no knowing what might become of Johnny, later on. Being bastard was no drawback these days, when the bar sinister served only as romantic emphasis to noble blood. Yes, of one thing she was sure. She would be proud of him.

And Johnny was something to be proud of. He was an enormous child for his age, and had even then that air of importance that was so to distinguish him in later years. Under the effete fair fluff that was just beginning to blur the smooth dome of his head, his tufted eyebrows knitted fiercely over the problem of an extraordinary world, and under them his eyes bulged, a pale and choleric blue. Unable at this stage to express himself by word of mouth, he concentrated on obtaining what he wanted by means of his eyes, and every person and every object with which he came into contact was subjected to the same terrifying all-embracing stare. And when he transferred his attention from one object to another, his eyes rolled, even at six months. His chin he kept always tucked closely in, so that it became three chins, and his wrists and ankles were wreathed in rolls of fat. He had, too, a way of clasping his hands over his large stomach, and of deliberating, which was positively uncanny. His grandfather distrusted

and disliked him. He was class-conscious. But Johnny was above such triflings, and ignored his grandfather, as he ignored anything else which did not please him, and came uproariously through his first winter, growing fatter and fatter as his family grew leaner and leaner, and taking an increasing pleasure in the strange noises that issued, at will, from his mouth. It was he who waked first in the fainthearted dawns; and stayed waking longest in the protracted nights, and his clutching predatory hands were always astir, seizing and squeezing whatever was in their reach. He seemed to have skipped altogether the first wondering stages of babyhood, as if he had been born both forewarned and forearmed; and the village women, looking down enviously on his lusty kickings, sighed: "He will be a handful," they said. And though his mother did not answer them, she was pleased, and rejoiced sullenly above him as he lay sprawling in her lap.

The village was isolated through every winter, as certainly as if it had been enclosed by miles of stormy water. England was still a wild strange wooded country, whose few roads formed a slender ribbon joining the cathedral towns to the capital, but whose byways ended in forked barely trodden paths on the edges of swamps and moors, beyond which lay no-man's-land, a terrifying unending waste, like an uncharted sea. The small indigenous communities which sprang up wherever water and a degree of safety and comfort were to be found, barely sustained themselves, and knew nothing of municipalities. The streets of Heaven, which were paved with gold, were not more difficult to conceive by

them than the cobblestone streets of York and Canterbury and London. The many mansions of Heaven were as easily imagined as the towering cathedrals and the beautiful palaces which, so they were told, existed here on earth. To those who could not read or write — and in the villages no one possessed these accomplishments — hearsay was the very breath of life, and a mind starved of all but facts swallows every fiction and disbelieves nothing — or everything.

In summertime life went slowly, slowly. In winter every motion stopped. The world was white under a pall of snow that deadened every sound, blurred every shape, and buried everything except the need for warmth and food. On the great Roman roads messengers and soldiers formed an often-broken chain between one town and another, and the monasteries and houses of retreat, filled with pilgrims and palmers in the summer, were empty of guests. The industrious monks took life easily then, living fairly comfortably on the produce from their wide acres, and forgetting their own cold chilblained hands and feet in remembering the Hands and Feet upon the Cross. . . .

But the small villages were not so fortunate, and through the first heraldic winds of a bitter spring, the peasants' children were sent out to forage in the woods for what acorns the pigs and squirrels had left over from the winter, to take home that they might be utilized in an unattractive but very filling soup. Above the numbed fields a sky like granite mocked their fragile scudding figures, men and women in miniature, on a most urgent errand.

They took stout sticks with them, and trod out a path in the snow to the woods, and hurried home again with their burdens, and the snow obliterated their tracks in the next night's fall. . . . Except from the village huts to the wood, no road was visible. Winter had wiped it out. . . .

In London itself the river froze, leaving a silver track like the track of a gigantic snail over the marshes of Spitalfields and Moorfields — and rickety houses were burned down in a too zealous attempt to produce a little warmth. On such occasions the idlers and apprentices rejoiced. Even a fire is news, and since the French War languished, and King Edward spent his time in wordy quarrels with his parliaments, excitement fed itself on meagre fare. Despite the deadening effect of cold weather, in the big cities men were still restless to be up and doing, and the knights, safe at home on their own estates, fretted and fumed for war again. Even the old war-dogs, scarred with a tingling reminder of every engagement, found no pleasure in sitting over their fires and dozing the time away. And at Falwell in Gloucestershire Sir William Falstaff grew short-tempered with his good wife and family, and woke with a roar from effeminate afternoon forty-winks to rail at the uselessness and inanity of his existence.

Poor man, he suffered from lack of congenial society, and was not aware of it. Entirely uneducated from birth save in military and chivalrous affairs, he had a capable and hungry brain, and there was no one to help him fill it. In moments of relaxation this

brain of his would begin to trouble him, reaching out after conundrums and argument like the loose questing strands of a spider's web, feeling for a reassuring fact to fix upon. Except in extreme weather, his moments of relaxation were few, for he would be out hunting or hawking or playing roughly with his children in the great yard before his house. Such healthy exercise was tiring, and before his French wounds could begin to trouble him he would throw himself across his bed, and soon be asleep and snoring. And his sleep was dreamless. No vision ever crossed his mind of Calote, his paramour at Gramercy. She had disappeared from his recollection at the precise moment that she had disappeared from his sight, round the bend in the road when he galloped away from her last winter. Besides, she had been a fleshly, not an intellectual companion, and what Sir William desired, and what he would never know he desired, was some one else's wits to sharpen his own dull ones upon. That was the tragedy of a too active life: it left no occupation for inaction. His present dissatisfaction was with his eldest son, William, a boy of three years old, whose pleasure in female company seemed almost perverted to his father. Besides, he was so quiet. He was never known to sing or shout, or cry aloud, or talk above a lady's level. Like all ignorant men Sir William was full of theories about education, and one of these was that children should be taken from the nursery as soon as they were weaned. He had acted upon this, and removed William to his own quarters in the house, and the boy had pined away like a sick

fowl. So he had given him back again in disgust to the petticoats.

The experience rankled. His wife, being meek, did not remind him of it or jeer at him, as other wives might have done, but her very meekness filled the good man with fury, and his own burly figure and deep voice seemed crude and out of place in this hushed atmosphere of peacetime and reproduction and the clod-hopper affairs of farm and tenantry. For him there was nothing to do. His wife and her women managed the house, and his bailiff managed the farm. He could sit and sit, before the great beechwood fire, and fight his old battles over again as he dozed, just as his dog Tassel would quiver and whimper in his dreams, hunting some phantom hare through the dim fields of memory. . . . No, it was not enough, God's soul and body, it was not enough!

So all through the winter Sir William chafed and fumed, and longed for news from London telling him that the war with France had been renewed, and that the peace was over. Sir William disliked and distrusted peace. It brought so many unpleasant duties with it, fit only for clerks and friars. There were papers to sign, and aids to collect, and money to pay out, always an ever-increasing amount of money to be taken out of Sir William's secret hiding-place and sent off post-haste to London, to his sovereign. And his sovereign's appetite was insatiable. One might suppose that he thought his knights laid golden eggs, and had only to melt them down to provide money for the court. Not that money for war was grudged. Necessities were

necessities. But when it came to paying a prince's ransom for a new dinner-service at the palace, or for a petticoat for that godless woman at court — Sir William ground his few teeth to think of it. Nobody could say he hadn't his sovereign's interest at heart.... God save the King, of course — and God put a few ideas of economy into that kingly head!

Christmas was not particularly merry that year, for Sir William's wife and Sir William's children, and Sir William's servants and Sir William's dogs, and every one of them sighed for warm weather again, and for its attendant occupations which would, heaven willing, take Sir William off their hands.

Sir William's attitude was typical of his time: a robust product of a young and robust country, he saw in ordeal by battle the ultimate purpose of life. To that end he had been trained, and in that occupation he would die, or so he hoped and trusted. War was still to him an urgent and unavoidable affair. One also which was until recently blessed by the Church. It was the only *milieu* for noble blood, and he deplored, as did his contemporaries, the growing tendency to look upon military engagements lightheartedly, or to use them as a mart between captors and prisoners. He deplored the Pope's recent and tactful attempts as peacemaker between the antagonists. To him all wars were holy wars, and he went to them as his fathers before him had gone on their crusades, with heart and soul involved, as well as purse and person.

And before he died, he saw the crowning glories of Crécy and the Surrender of Calais, and his crusading spirit leapt out of his tough old body, as the arrow leaps from the strong yew bow — but right off this planet.

Chapter II

Early Youth

I

Meanwhile young Johnny grew, elbowing his way into the life at Gramercy, sublimely selfish and self-sufficient. At five he was a pleasant bouncing child to look upon, though always a little corpulent. His effete downy hair had thickened now into a mop like a haycock, and in his prominent blue eyes the most unchildlike sardonic gleam would leap at times, as if he had suddenly realized, even at that age, how curious it was for him to be there at all, in such unsatisfactory surroundings. For if his father had given him nothing else, he had bequeathed him a share of his own questing hungry brain, and Calote had added to it, all unknowing, a large portion of her wry sense of humour that lay hidden under the unapproachable silences.

To see him, lolling in the spring sunshine with the other children, or gambolling amongst the animals, or splashing on the edge of the village pool, no one would have suspected noble blood. But then noble blood is an enchanted liquid, as marvellous in

its benefits, as unobtainable, as the potions of alchemists, and to Johnny it certainly mattered little whether he knew of its existence in his veins or not. Probably he always knew. His bursting self-confidence must have told him that there was something about him which justified it. He lorded it over the other children when he felt inclined (succeeding in enforcing his opinions by sheer weight, not of argument but of avoirdupois), and, when he felt inclined, he could be more coercible than any of them. Before he was old enough to reason, instinct guided him, and the instinct to have a good deal more than a fair share of whatever was going led him at an early age to forsake the children of his own age and capabilities and to inflict himself upon the older boys, who could not leave behind anything which broadcast their desertion in so earsplitting a fashion. The womenfolk of the village pampered and spoilt him, with a view to getting on to his father's soft side when he called again, and the men, too, went out of their way to be pleasant to him. He took all favours without a word of thanks, and this would have convinced them, if nothing else had, that he was his father's son. Certainly there was nothing servile about young Johnny. He took what he wanted. He had to go on excursions with the older boys, and when he could walk no further he had to be carried, and he had to see everything that they saw, and eat everything that they ate, until he weighed on their consciences and their backs alike as much as any Old Man of the Sea. But they never told, on returning home, where they took Johnny, or what they gave Johnny to eat, or how Johnny

came to get that scar on his right knee. And Johnny, supernaturally wise, did not tell either.

Ordinarily he was a voluble child. The other children sang and shouted, as inevitably as the birds that sang and the lambs that baa-ed. They did not converse together, except spasmodically. Their vocabulary was small, and they made no efforts to enrich it. When they plotted together they talked, or when they were sad and needed consolation, but when they were happy they hooted and they yelled, they imitated every farm noise, and every noise of wind and rain, but they did not talk. It was as if they had already divined how close to the soil they lived, and how useless it would be for them to discuss strange things, when as soon as they were big enough they would be scattered too far apart for talk, with their reaping and binding and hoeing. And that they would be too weary when they crept home to their huts again to waste time in idle speech.

But Johnny talked. He talked at an early age, spaciously, graciously, with a condescending nodding of the head. He talked to an audience or to himself, as the case might be. He talked, in fact, far more than he shouted or sang, so that when these two alternatives overtook him there was a rollicking *abandon* in them that was missing in the more natural noises of his contemporaries.

In summertime the older boys were out of doors all day, going to roost only when the last glimmer of light had disappeared from the sky. They roamed in a small herd about the manor grounds, out on the common or in the woods, eating as they went, filching apples from the lord's

orchard and roots from the communal fields they passed through. The sun and the warm windy rain tanned them until they resembled brown berries, and the pallor, which their winter confinement had induced, disappeared. Those were halcyon days, and Johnny was not left out of them. Mad ambition had wrought havoc with his legs, which inclined to bandiness, and though stout and short of breath he forced himself to make journeys which fatigued much older children. He could always be seen, like a dog or a goat, bringing up the rear of his party, frowning with concentration, fighting his way over the heathery common or through the long grasses which reached to his shoulders, with equal ferocity. And when the spirit was still willing but the flesh deplorably weak, he sat down with a bump, and one majestic howl brought his companions scurrying back to offer consolation — not because Johnny was popular, but because he was Sir William's boy, and Sir William was the giant Fee-fo-fum as far as Johnny's companions were concerned.

In their wanderings the children penetrated sometimes to the very borders of the manor grounds, where the tilled earth mysteriously gave place to acres and acres of boggy moorland or of stony heights. There they flung themselves down on their bellies, and stared out, longingly, over the Unexplored. What lay beyond? Was it really true that if one ventured out there alone, huge animals came to gobble one up, and fairies and witches snatched at one's shadow? They sighed enviously, aching to attempt what they dared not. Even the sheep did

not stray so far. So they returned, dragging their feet along the dusty road, with young Johnny straggling as always behind them, his ears pricked to catch every word of their desultory conversation. He had roared at them to pick him up and carry him, but for once they were too engrossed.

With considerable discomfort to himself the small boy lumbered after them, fascinated by a phrase they kept repeating, that he had never heard before, "The Fair . . ." They were discussing the annual Fair which took place at a city called York. They knew of it only by hearsay, for sometimes the lord's bailiff would attend the Fair there, and the shepherd would go with him, to sell the woolpacks which were not required for home weaving. The shepherd had often told them of that Fair and of other Fairs, and his adventures had lost nothing in the telling. Johnny, hearing them recounted for the first time, was enthralled. Delicious words he had never met before sidled ingratiatingly into his consciousness, attracting him by sheer sound alone; juggler and jongleur, fur and amber, silks and ornaments for churches, dancing bears, spices and strange sweetmeats, fortune tellers and calves with three legs and two heads. He stumbled after, unable any longer to distinguish one strange word from another, drunken with the exotic visions he was conjuring up. It was as if the stained glass window in Gramercy church had suddenly disintegrated into vivid moving men and women before him — as if the very apostles had undergone a metamorphosis into jugglers and dancers and merchants, as if the silks and spices and sweatmeats were dangling in

the air all round him, just out of reach, playing bob-apple with his imagination. . . . CRASH! He fell face downwards, tripping over a hidden stone in the rough roadway. It hurt him, but not as much as it would have hurt a less well-covered child, and having reached the ground so expeditiously he lay extended there, squirming himself into a more comfortable position, resting his untidy head upon his arms, and staring down without resentment at the stone which had tripped him. On either side of the roadway where he lay the fields of oats lifted yellow standards into the sky, their ranks broken here and there by the bloody banner of poppies, and in the centre of one of the fields, standing as upright as if it were growing too among the corn, a peacock's feather flaunted itself like a royal banner in the midst of the banners of its subjects. The old peacock from the manor grounds sometimes ventured out among the common fields, but how he managed to plant his tail-feathers with such exactitude would always remain a mystery. . . .

Johnny's companions were out of sight when he raised his head again. He hardly cared, for they had given him sufficient subject-matter, and his attention returned to the stone which had brought about his downfall. And as he stared, the stone became the centre of the Fair at a place called York, the tiny blue periwinkles and the mustard-blossom about it became silks and awnings spread upon the stalls, the busy ants were merchants with their merchandise. . . .

They missed him, when the sun went down, and his grandfather was sent out in search of him. Two hours later he returned, grumbling horribly at the

weight he was expected to carry at the end of a long day. Johnny was tucked under one arm, dangling like a puppy, but still sound asleep.

"You're always thinking of your aches and pains. It's not as if he were an *ordinary* child," said Calote.

"It's not as if he were an ordinary *weight,*" said her long-suffering father. "Really, the things I'm expected to put up with!"

2

THE FAIR was held on the moorland which lay just outside the city walls of York. It was to last eight days, and during that time all ordinary commerce ceased. Shops were shut, and merchandise which arrived during the Fair by the slow road and waterways lay stacked where it ended its journey, until the Fair should be over. The narrow streets were thronged with strangers looking for lodgings, and the air itself was full of holiday and relaxation. Best clothes were worn by the townspeople and their wives. Jewels were dangling round necks, bobbing from ears, shining on fingers and gloves and shoes. Horses caparisoned like the King's own palfreys pawed the cobbled streets and snorted, shaking their scarlet bridle-reins, and the gay squires could hardly hold them until their lords — who has been visiting other lords — came clanking down the steps again, glorious in armour, proud as Lucifer, but as curious as the rest of the townsfolk for the Fair to begin.

And behind these stately visitors came the mendicant friars, begging as they went, sleeping where

they found themselves for the night, behind haystacks and hedges, or in the monastic houses. They brought pardons to the Fair to sell, and very often did good business with

Pardons for forgery, 8s.
Pardons for robbing a church, the same.
Pardons for perjury and lying, 6s.
Joint pardons for adultery, 40s.

Pardons for arson and incest and for striking a priest, at varied and attractive prices. For though the first few days of holiday may go devil-may-care, when purses are lighter consciences begin to weigh like lead.

And side by side with the friars came the brothers from the great Cistercian and Benedictine and Dominican houses, with their honey and their woolsacks, and their grain-sacks, their illuminated books and carved and gilded church images to sell at the Fair. And after them in their turn came the mystery-players, the dancers and the gypsies, the Fat Women, the Prophesying Child, the Mermaid in a Bottle Found Off Flamborough Head and Still Breathing, the thieves and wastrels and idlers who accompany every calvacade. The Hanseatic merchants passed such small fry in a cloud of dust, on their expensive and mettlesome horses, scattering the little Galloway ponies and the moorland sheep, all on their way to the Fair. On their way to the Fair too, came the cloth-sellers, with their stuffs woven and dyed at home — Lincoln green, Coventry blue and Yorkshire grey, fustian from Norwich, baize from Suffolk, friezes from Chester, serges

from Colchester, kerseys from Devonshire, and stout Kentish broacloth for ordinary wear.

Traffic came by river as well as road: ships laden with foreign produce had sailed up the Humber a week previously, and were even now waiting at the river's edge for customs inspection. They brought flax and tar and pitch to the Fair, and rich furs from Russia and amber from the East. France too, had sent silks and velvets of supple length and fine texture, and gloves for fine ladies and for cardinals. Fish for the Fair came in daily, but the fishermen were not allowed to mingle with the other folk because of their stinking clothes, so they stayed down at the river's edge, and gambled away their time, until the Fair should be over, and they were free to go off on their fishing again.

And the Minster, under whose auspices the Fair was held, rose strongly and beautifully into the sky, with its square towers, as if its real business were still too much the Glory of God to allow it to do more than just permit the activities bustling around its base. And though the crowds increased daily, surging through the streets, and staring up curiously at the gargoyles and the saints so high above them, the Minster ignored them, awing even the most riotous into temporary solemnity by its very height and majesty. Away to the north the sister cathedral of Durham rose still more splendidly into the blue, being built upon a height, stronger and more solid than a castle, more beautiful than any palace could be.

But the excitement in York could not be restrained for long. Already the children were squat-

ing at the moor's edge, staring at the frowning notaries grouped together, and watching the Fair people, busy with pick and hammer, putting up their stalls. Even the monks of St. Mary's Monastery could not help a little secular curiosity, and were seen sometimes peeping through their windows and over their walls, hoping perhaps for a glimpse of the Fat Woman, or the Mermaid in a Bottle — who knows?

Gramercy was one of hundreds of small manors which disposed of their unwanted produce at York Fair. They grew nothing directly for that purpose, for their first and only problem was to grow enough to keep themselves, but when they had had a good harvest and enough to spare they made the pilgrimage to York, and returned a week later, laden not with money but often with articles bartered in exchange. Mirrors and pewter mugs were brought, iron with which to tip their farm utensils, precious wax for the church candles and for their own illumination, and, if they had done well, they took home with them grotesque foreign toys for the children, almost diabolical in their ingenuity, and at first rousing tears of terror in the recipients. There was very little which could not be bought or sold at the Fair.

Although most of the strangers were already in the town, the pens and pounds for the livestock were still empty. The livestock, forced to travel slowly, came last, and was even now trailing along the roads which converged on York. The herds of sheep and cows came from almost trackless homes, and when the beasts felt the cobbled stones under

their feet a panic seized them, and the dogs were kept as busy as their masters, running hither and thither after their charges, and the air was full of hallooings and shoutings and the thumping of sticks on unruly hides. . . .

Although Gramercy brought no livestock, the bailiff and the shepherd from that manor were among the last to arrive. Something had delayed them at the outset, and now later they saw the distant outline of the Minster with thanksgiving. They had not lost their way, and they had not been set upon by robbers or wild beasts — two causes for thankfulness to the saints.

And if they were grateful, they were also a little irritable. They had been harassed, on this last stage of their journey, by herds of cattle before and behind them, and their low wooden wagon, with its two tired horses, was even now sandwiched between two herds. The cowmen's dogs were for ever under the horses' feet, and the shouts and curses of the herdsmen were continuous and penetrating. The bailiff was too busy with the reins of his horses to do more than mutter furiously at the delay, but the shepherd, sitting high among his woolsacks, was at liberty to exhaust his stock of sarcasm at the expense of the herdsmen. He did this loudly and leisurely, and more than made up for his eleven months of enforced solitude and silence. Even the bailiff grew tired of it. It was September, and the sun beat down on the road, so that every particle of dust raised by the trotting feet of the cattle shone like crushed diamonds in the air. His eyes were red-rimmed and sore, and a tickling in his throat made him conjure

up visions of home-brew. He was so far from home-brew, or from *any* brew, while that dolt of a shepherd talked as if *his* throat had been oiled only five minutes before. At last he turned angrily:

"Since you know so much about it, you can come and take the reins for a while," he said. "Then you can *show* 'em how to manage animals."

The shepherd got uneasily to his feet, swaying with the motion of the wagon. His seat had been so comfortable, and he had been enjoying himself so much. . . .

"Come *on,* you," said the bailiff.

When the exchange had been made, the bailiff stretched himself at ease, and shut his eyes. He had to clench his teeth tightly, because the wagon, jolting over the stones as they approached the city, had made him bite his tongue before now. The softness of the woolsacks, in spite of their heat, stole comfortingly around him. He was on his way to the one holiday of his year, and he meant to enjoy it. . . .

The bailiff was a conscientious man, and worked very hard. He was the only man who could read or write at Gramercy, and as a consequence he was always being involved in extra work. He was also the only man who could solve difficult arithmetical problems, and this had aged him before his time. The responsibility of the entire manor lay on his shoulders. A day or two of idleness, a week or so in bed with a chest trouble that sometimes laid him low, and unbelievable work piled up before him, into the far distant future. Nor was it only book-work that he had, for like all conscientious men he liked to see that the orders he gave were carried out, and this

involved many miles of riding, and visiting, and overseeing, in a week. Repairs, boundaries, extensions, permissions, forfeits, taxes, percentages, decisions of points of law — all came under his one control, and, having to please over a hundred different men and women, he succeeded in pleasing none. Nor was that the worst, for, though he might satisfy his conscience, the bailiff had to satisfy something far less impartial — his employer; and at such time he would groan and beat his head with his hands, and wish he had never learned to read and write, since these talents stood him in such poor stead. Sir William, unfortunately, had a method of judgment of his own. It was no good talking of percentages and permissions to him. He extorted, and the bailiff explained . . . and when he had ridden away again, and the wrath of the peasantry had descended on the bailiff, life was a bitter and empty affair, filled only with arrears of work to be got through somehow — some time. . . . It was the responsibility that aged the bailiff. It seemed to him that Gramercy hung round his neck like a drowning man — and as soon as he had saved the drowning man, the man got up and hit him. . . . So it was pleasant, now, to escape from it all, for eight whole days, to pretend that there was never anything more to be overseen or settled in the whole wide world again. Here he was on his way to York, and the manor and all its inhabitants lay far behind him. The shepherd was responsible for the woolsacks. He was responsible for nothing. He took a deep breath, and a smile came over his tired face, as he lolled back more comfortably into his seat. . . .

An uneasy doze had enveloped him, when a porpoise-like heaving from below threw him off his balance. He sat up angrily, blinking in the dust and sun. The heaving continued. . . .

"Who is it? Come out of there at once!" said the bailiff.

Johnny's round red face appeared suddenly from somewhere beneath the bailiff's feet. It was like another sun appearing, but it cast no extra glow on the bailiff's face. Instead a deep shadow appeared to be cast over it. He did not speak for a moment and his shoulders sagged. Responsibility was on him again. The holiday feeling was gone.

"What does this mean?" he said. A little more of Johnny emerged.

"Going to the Fair," said Johnny. Still a little more of his stout person was dragged from under the woolsacks. He pulled himself up by the edge of the wagon, and turned and faced the bailiff. Standing up, he had all the advantage. A sudden jolt of the wagon capsized him again, but he managed to sit down as if he had always intended to sit down, and he faced the bailiff gravely, folding his arms across his stomach in imitation. Then he smiled. The smile began in a slight twitching of his forehead, then it went into his eyes, then it quivered on the tip of his dirty nose, then it melted into his mouth, then it spread benignly among the creases of his triple chin. He had just lost his front teeth, and the smile was almost alarming in its generous proportions. The bailiff felt swallowed up in it, as in an innocuous quicksand. He crumpled, and in his eyes

Johnny seemed to swell and swell, becoming every minute older and fiercer and more corpulent.... Sir William's very self, riding in the wagon with him to the Fair at York. He glanced suddenly and suspiciously at the shepherd's back, and was convinced by its air of complete innocence that it was he who had hidden the boy away like this. Everybody was conspiring against him. If this sort of thing could go on under his nose, what on earth would be happening at Gramercy while he was away? A helpless fury seized him, and he swore loudly and at great length, kicking out at the noses of the cattle who were pressing on the wagon from behind. Then he turned fiercely to Johnny. Knight's son or no Knight's son, he must be taught a lesson.

"Look here, you!" he began.

But Johnny was already looking elsewhere. He had clambered up beside the shepherd, and was staring, staring into the green distance ahead of him, where the massed buildings stood, and at the great building in the very centre which looked like a large flower growing up from out of its clump of leaves. An excitement not to be contained was surging up inside him, and he began to thump on the wooden seat with his hands, and against the wooden boards with his heels, shouting and yelling a wordless ditty of rejoicing, of "Hi-ho! Hi-ho! Hi-ho!" until the tired horses picked up their drooping heads, and both shepherd and bailiff were deafened, even to the shoutings and yellings of the herdsmen before and behind, and to the barkings of the dogs that accompanied them.

3

THE FAIR had been encamped for three days when the Plague spread through it, sweeping down buyer and seller like a scythe, silent and deadly. Even in the terror which flamed up in the town, the inhabitants found time to question as to how this thing had come upon them. They had heard vague rumours of a hideous disease which had overtaken London and the southern counties, but they had never suspected that it would reach them. And now, without time for expostulation, for some counter-move on their part, the town was stricken. The vendors had fled, leaving their wares still on the stalls behind them, and the townspeople had hurried home, and locked their doors to the outer world, as if bars and bolts could keep death out. York was silent, waiting, closed up into itself like a withered flower, and outside on the deserted moorland, which had been so gay with shouts and laughter, with hagglings and wild music only three days before, a small wind blew among the awnings and the tents, stirring them uneasily, and livestock left untended died in the pens. . . .

Rumour has a way of coming true. The Plague was, as they had heard, no ordinary disease, and there were no ordinary ways of meeting it. Mothers whose children were healthy at daybreak found them dead before sunset. Those still brave enough to walk the streets were struck down as they went. The Plague was everywhere. Like smoke, it could creep in through the smallest crevices, and it hung in the air like a shroud over the city. Now there

was no sound left but the interminable tolling of bells, mournful and slow, for the ever-increasing dead. And even while the tollers tolled a spasm of pain shook them, their knees sagged, their hold on the rope relaxed and they too rolled to the floor, dead.... All over Europe, all over England, in city or in village, one in three was taken of every living thing, and a stench rose up from the infected earth as steadily as the sound of bells tolling rose up into the skies. There was no respite. Everywhere, on every hand, people were fleeing from the Plague — and the Plague, at its leisure, reached out a long hand after them and snatched them up, lifeless. Traffic ceased between infected town and infected town. Ships stood out in the roads, at a safe distance from infected ports. The markets were all empty, the shops were all shut. But the churches were still thronged by frantic seekers after salvation, praying for deliverance from their God's rightful wrath, and asking for their sins to be forgiven them, though still ignorant of what those sins might be. And the burial grounds were more thronged than the churches.

But if the Plague did nothing else for benefit, it succeeded in stopping for a time the ceaseless skirmishing on Welsh and Scottish borders, and the small cattle who lived there, whose hides were too tough for any Black Death, took advantage of the unnatural quietude about them, and grew fatter than they had been for years. It was such a pleasant change for them, not to spend their days being galloped over one border and back again, in a sort of Tom Tiddler's game. Even the mountain goats took

courage, and came down from the heights, to browse on the greener grass in the valleys. . . .

Young Johnny had been mislaid at the Fair, at a very early stage. While the bailiff was still standing at the moor's edge, arguing with the notaries about the lack of accommodation provided for the woolsack sellers, the child had strayed off in search of more interesting surroundings. The busy scene before him drew him on. He could no more have stood looking on at such a sight without actually participating in it than he could have turned his back and gone home again. This was the Fair at last, and it was for HIM, for HIS benefit, and he would see all there was to see, and hear all there was to hear, and eat all there was to eat, before he came away. For so young a child he was extraordinarily self-reliant. He could plan his own days already, but on this occasion all his plans were swept away. The Fair engulfed him. He had no sooner set foot on the magic ground which held it than every coherent thought deserted him, and his five senses reached out unbidden towards this great, glorious, moving conglomeration around him. The smell of the crushed hot grass under his feet, the stuffy smell of the awnings, the bitter smell of the tinsel on the dancers' dresses, the rank smell of the beasts, the smell of sweat, of fruit, of cloth, of leather, of dung, of wine, flung themselves up Johnny's nostrils, exhilarating him, surrounding him, intermingling and separating themselves from one another, distinct yet indistinct, individual yet all-in-one, finally and ultimately commingling into the one triumphant unique super-smell of the Fair.

As with scent, so with sight and sound. His eyes, so long used to the soft tints of country things, were almost hurt by the shouting scarlets, the flaming yellows, the cold glitter of steel and tinsel. Colours swam before him, twining like twisted rainbows, like maypole ribbons, like stained-glass-window colours, melting, elongating, moving and twisting before his eyes. There were so many people here. He had not thought there were so many people in the world.

His ears received the jumble of sound greedily — the hoarse cries of the hawkers, the quarrellings of drunkards, the mooings and bleatings of the penned animals, the shrill laughter of women, children crying, the drums of the mystery-players, the chanting of the monks behind the high wall, the hammerings of the stalls not yet erected. Happy and exhausted he had squatted down behind the Cornish miner's enclosure, among the tin and the iron, resting his back against a tree and shutting his eyes. They would never believe all this at Gramercy.

The minute he shut his eyes the sound receded, ever so slightly; and as if distance had some property of mergence he was no longer able to distinguish one sound from another, though they still assailed his ears deliciously. The steady throbbing roar of it all seemed now to come up out of the very earth and rise into the sky, like the gigantic humming of bees. . . . One fact remained fixed in his mind. "This is the Fair!" and round about it all other sounds improvised an accompaniment. His head drooped forward, but his sharp ears still heard the din. . . .

"This is the Fair!"

"Come buy! Come buy!"

"Step this way if you want a bargain!"

"Moo! Mer.... Moo! Mer... Baa! Baa!"

Jingle-jangle jingle-jangle, tirrilirrilirril lee!

Ti-clop ti-clop ti-clop "Clear the way there!"

"Fine kersey cloth, fine cloth!"

THIS IS THE FAIR.

"... tells me you have been obstructing the view of his stall. You will attend..."

"Moo! Mer.... Moo!"

"Bracelets and rings for the girls! Real rubies from Bartholomew Fair, bought from a bankrupt and going cheap!"

"Spare a penny for an old man, sir, wounded in both legs in the French wars ——"

"Blast yer impudence, can't you look where yer going?"

"Hear the Prophesying Child! Only two years and eight months, can foretell the Weather, the next War, and the Name of the Intended! Step up and buy a ticket!"

"THIS IS THE FAIR!"

"Tell your fortune, Pretty Boy?"

Tootle-oo! Tootle-oo!

Ding-dang-dong! Ding-dang-dong! Dingle-dangle-dongle BOOM!

"Fresh cod, fresh lampreys, fresh pike ——"

"Moo! Mer... Moo!"

"This way. Step up, step up for the Dancing Bear!"

"... Heu pietas! Heu prisca fides!"

"My point is, that if they let these foreigners in they'll ruin trade..."

"Fine linen! Fine linen! A king never slept in better, not even with Lady Alice!"

"No flesh on it? *No flesh?* . . . I tell you I've fed this particular bird more careful than if it were my own grandmother!"

"Kin I have another, Mummy?"

"No, you can *not.*"

"Mummy, kin I have another ——"

"If you pull at my skirts like that much more I'll ask your father to give you a good thrashing!"

This — is — the Fair!

Baa! . . . Baa! . . . Baa!

4

The bailiff and the shepherd never found their runaway. On the third day, when people had begun to sicken and drop to the ground between the narrow booths, they grew uneasy. Until then they had always hoped that he would turn up somehow, some time, before the end of the Fair. Meanwhile they had not worried overmuch about his food supplies, knowing that strangers were kind to children, and, even if they weren't, that Johnny's instincts of self-preservation were well developed. Children were lost every day on the Fair-ground. They turned up, sooner or later.

But Johnny did not turn up. Instead the Plague cleared the Fair-ground as completely as if no living person had ever strolled there, and day by day the wooden props of stall and tent collapsed, and the rotting canvas coverings shrouded the rotting bodies in their folds. Over the cattle-pens a swarm of flies

hung like a black cloud, and the stench followed the fleeing traders far along the roads that led from the sick and panic-stricken city. On the fourth day the roads were thick with refugees.

And on the fifth day, daring to delay no longer, the two men set out again for Gramercy. The shepherd, still voluble, moaned the loss of Johnny.

"He was such a good listener," he said. "He asked such intelligent questions."

"Yes. I daresay his father'll do some questioning, too, when he comes to Gramercy!" said the bailiff. He had never loved Johnny for his own sake, as the saying goes, and now for the extra trouble that had been put upon him the bailiff heartily disliked the boy. He whipped up the horses to a gallop, and the shepherd, rattling like the shrivelled kernel of a nut in the empty wagon, continued to bemoan the early death of such a promising child.

And the same evening, despite the speed with which they had travelled, the Plague had overtaken them, and they sickened and died — the shepherd limp and protesting to the last, the bailiff morose as ever, sitting stiffly upright with the reins in his hands, and urging the horses onwards, until the nausea and pain he was fighting became too strong for him, and he slipped from his seat, over the shafts and into the roadway. Responsibility had gone from him at last.

5

THE Black Death ravaged England for a year and a day. Then, having established citizenship, as it were, it wandered off again through Flanders and

Germany, and finally back to the East from whence it came. The island lay exhausted, thinned of one-third of its population, still trying to explain the visitation. Some said that God and His Saints had punished the country for the dissolute life of the court. Others declared that it was not the court but the debauchery of the richer friars which had loosened all the devils in Hell to wreak their will.

And a few blamed neither the court nor the Church, but looked askance at the sanitary arrangements of the big towns, and at the lack of any sanitation at all in the smaller ones. The rivers and streams which ran through the towns were used indiscriminately both as sewers and as water supplies, and London herself, richest and filthiest of cities, lost a hundred thousand of her townspeople, and left twenty thousand to mourn them — and to continue richer and filthier in their habits than ever. The Thames, wide and clean and swiftly-flowing at Gravesend, now crawled sluggishly past Rotherhithe and the Tower, thickening into a dark-brown stream, bearing an evil smelling foamy scum upon it, as it passed under London Bridge and up into the narrower reaches of Twickenham and Staines. It had been the very life-blood of the city. Now it was a pestilent virus spreading through her veins.

All over the country the tidal rivers carried the same infection, extorting heaviest toll from the towns that clustered on their banks. Even the country streams, blocked by the swollen carcases of beasts, threw off effluvia. Only hidden water was safe, and in some cases the more isolated abbeys and monastic houses escaped any loss of life. They dug

their own wells, and held little or no communication with the outside world. Their estates, being huge, self-sufficed them, and, having a temporal world large enough for their own uses, their hearts were for the most part set in heavenly mansions.

Selby Abbey was one which had escaped the Plague. Though not far distant from York it had remained immune. Matins and lauds and vespers and complines still divided the days of the Benedictine monks who lived there, and though death might stand mocking on the high ramparts of the cathedral city, and though their brothers in St. Mary's Monastery there had died of the Plague as the common people had died, they had not yet heard of it. Besides, the Abbot of Selby did not cultivate the acquaintance of the Abbot of St. Mary's. The Abbot of St. Mary's was Italian, and there was no love lost, just then, between the "foreigners" and the native churchmen. But even Selby Abbey knew of the eight-day Fair, and recognized its importance. With their flocks of sheep and goats and milch cows they had enough for their own use and plenty over to send to the Fair. The lay brothers helped to separate the flocks for penning, and the goatherds and the shepherds of the great Abbey drove them off to York, controlled in their turn by the gentle guidance of Brother Hugh....

But before the week was up Brother Hugh was back again, and some of the goatherds and shepherds were back again, though some had died on the way. And Brother Hugh brought no money with him from the Fair. The livestock must be counted a dead loss for that year. Instead he brought with him a

very dirty, very hungry, very stout little boy. He took him straight to the Abbot's house where the Abbot was at dinner. The Abbot, whose cheerful round face was greasy from proximity with asparagus, put his napkin rather hastily and rather tactlessly to his nose. He knew Brother Hugh of old, and he stared now at that thin figure, in its close-clinging black gown, and then at the child, still grasping one of the monk's long sleeves. In his agile mind he was already thinking: "Now I wonder what disease, or other unpleasant characteristic that poor child has, that Granny Hugh should have taken him under his wing?" Aloud he said, lowering his napkin as one might lower a drawbridge, for a cautious couple of inches: "You are back early, my son?"

"Yes, Father."

"You concluded your business sooner than you expected?"

"Alas, Father, there was no business to be done — the Plague ——"

Up shot the Abbot's napkin again. He had not heard of a plague, but doubtless if there was a plague to be found Brother Hugh would find it. It also explained the presence of the little boy. The child did not look as if a mortal disease had settled upon it, but children often belied their looks, and it would be like Hugh to find a really infectious person, and bring him, not only to the Abbey, but to the heart of the Abbey — the Abbot's own residence. A sudden impatience made him pucker his brows, and begin to tap the table impatiently with the hand that did not hold the napkin. (He had had a certain amount of medical experience in his novitiate, and

so had supplanted an ignorant with a semi-educated terror of disease. Infection was an unknown quantity to him, with illimitable range and potency, once admitted. To Brother Hugh the word meant less than nothing. Still, it was no use expostulating at mealtimes with the consciousness of grease on one's chin.

"I see. . . . So there was a plague at York, eh?"

"Yes, Father."

"H'm. Very unfortunate. Very, very unfortunate. And the livestock?"

"We had to leave it, Father. The sheep had a rot on them, on the second day."

"Dear me. Dear, dear me. . . ." This was more serious than he supposed. Now the money for the new vestments was still to be collected somehow, somewhere.

Hugh was speaking again: "There was nothing else to be done, Father. We had to come away and leave the animals. People were dying every day. . . ."

Dying! The Abbot stared at the monk. A plague — but a plague did not necessarily imply death! There could be a plague of locusts, or lice, or of itching pimples, even of spots that marked one for life, but Death! The hand that held the napkin dropped to his knees, then crept up again to the reassuring beads: "A thousand shall fall at thy side and ten thousand at thy right hand, but it shall not come nigh thee. . . ."

"I see . . ." He paused, and stretched his hand to the goblet of claret. Johnny watched him, fascinated, as he raised the shining thing, with its curved rim, to his lips, and poured the crimson liquid down

his extended throat, without spilling a single drop. Then he sat back in his chair, and leaning his head against its tall carved back, he closed his eyes. It reminded Johnny of the hens drinking from the village pool at Gramercy, sipping and stretching their necks and shutting their eyes. Though this man was really far too fat and comfortable-looking to be like a hen. Brother Hugh was like a hen, with his long thin neck, and eager look. . . .

"And this child is suffering from the Plague, I suppose?"

"Not that I know of, Father. Of course, the disease has a way of developing later on."

"Pray God, no, for the boy's sake, Hugh."

"Amen, Father!"

Reassured, the Abbot beckoned Johnny with an authoritative though kindly finger, and Hugh, pushing the child forward, continued to pour out explanations of how he came to find him. The Abbot was not really listening, he was smiling at Johnny and Johnny, leaning heavily with one fat hand on the ecclesiastical knee, stretched up the other to the gleaming goblet of wine. The Abbot began to shake with steady subterranean laughter which bubbled up inside him and creased his face into a thousand wrinkles. Then he shook his head in humorous remonstrance at the child. The cheekiness of the action pleased him:

"Eh, tha art Yorkshire, la-ad," he said, then, "Very well, Hugh, you may go. Come back for your protégé in half an hour."

Hugh closed the great door softly after him, thanking God for his superior's lenience, then shak-

ing his lean head and sighing at the memory of the plague-stricken city left behind him.

And, sitting on the Abbot's knee, Johnny had three glasses of claret, lifting his head and shutting his eyes and throwing it down as he had seen the Abbot do. The Abbot had a vague notion that the wine might possibly disinfect Johnny, and Johnny had a vague notion, or possibly instinct, that good times do not last for ever, and that he should make hay while the sun shone, even though hay would never more be made at Gramercy. . . .

Chapter III

Boyhood

I

So Calote's son made the transition from village hut to abbey dormitory as naturally as if his career had been planned ahead for him by Providence. For five years the Benedictines both housed and fed him, spiritually as well as materially. They cropped his fair hair for him so that he no longer resembled an early Anglo-Saxon, and looked instead what he was — an orphan boy. They took from him the unnecessary diminutive of his name, and called him John, constantly exhorting him to remember his illustrious namesakes in the Church, especially John the Baptist. They gave him the best schooling in England — a smattering of Latin, a sufficiency of arithmetic, and the ability to read and write. And withal, even in his leisure hours, they sought to impress him, by precept and example, and to cultivate the same aims in him as they had in themselves, the desire to serve God through the Church.

But in this they were not sanguine, for though they were a gentle and hospitable order, and

strangers were welcome at the Abbey, they knew by bitter experience the frailty of human nature. It was not that many were called. Many came without any calling — and still fewer were chosen for the holy work which lay before them.

And John proved no exception. He evaded the monastic influence as he had evaded the Plague, without the slightest effort on his own part. It was a gift. As a vegetable thrives under good growing conditions so he thrived, growing taller every day, yet keeping always, not yet an *actual* fleshiness, but an indelible *impression* of fleshiness to come. His cheeks reddened and glowed. His nose began to lose the purely anonymous quality of children's noses and to acquire a character of its own. It became a bold and thrusting nose, just a little too large for the face in general, with pugnacious nostrils and defiant curves. Under it the mouth was full and red, with a looseness in the lower lip. His eyes, being already mature in their expression, did not change, but kept instead the appearance of sardonic surprise. They still rolled when he grew angry or excited.

He seldom remembered the past, or any incident connected with his early existence in the village, but what he did remember vividly, and what had impressed upon him the atmosphere in which he desired to spend his life, was the Fair. Even its chaotic end had not spoilt for him its ecstatic beginning. He had found himself at the Fair. It was as if he knew then why he had always been different from the other children at Gramercy. It was because he was of a different spirit. *He* was not born to till the soil — not he! Dust he might be, and unto dust he

might eventually return, and he saw no reason for concerning himself with dust for the short span which lay between the two translations. Life was short. Somehow, he *knew* that life was short, and it was not a thing that an ordinary child would know.... He had seen death at the Fair. People had sickened and died all round him. It did not impress him, any more than the dead carcases of animals at Gramercy, killed and salted down for the winter impressed him. That kind of death was nothing — an event which was bound to occur sooner or later. What was far worse was a living death, a dulled and heavy spirit that never rose above the clods of earth it tended....

And so it was that he forgot the loneliness and discomfort he had been through at the Fair, before Brother Hugh had found him, and remembered only the noise and colour and good cheer. For a long while every night before he fell asleep he used to imagine himself in York again, strolling before the different booths, tasting the sweetmeats, teasing the penned sheep and goats; until sleep at last overcame him, and in his dreams a gigantic juggler juggled with the holy candlesticks in Selby Church, and somewhere in the dizzy press of faces that crowded his consciousness the bailiff's face would emerge for a moment, and then blur back again....

Once having thoroughly impressed the brothers with the fact that he would never make a good monk, young John led a happy life. No boy could have been happier. He was free to roam, in his spare hours, over the spacious acres of the Abbey precincts — and there were so many acres that half a dozen Gram-

ercys might have been hidden between its hills and valleys without discomfort. What need was there to stir outside the walls to see the world, when the walls held a little world within them?

The Abbey itself was fit for a King's residence and the King had been known to stay there for a night on one of his numerous excursions to the North. Even a royal retinue could not exhaust the hospitality and accommodation of the Benedictines. The church was the main building, and the Abbot's quarters came next, and surrounding the church like a small private village were the monks' quarters, the novitiates' quarters, quarters for physicians, surgeons and schoolmasters, a porter's lodge, a lodging-house for strangers, pilgrims and palmers, stables for horses, sheds for cattle and goats, stalls for swine, hen-houses and goose-pens. Then there were many miscellaneous storehouses for fruit-drying, brewing and baking, tanning and fulling, and a blacksmith's shop with all its attendant delights. For the Selby brothers were still industrious, in an age when the sloth and viciousness of the Church was the common scandal of the land. They knew no scandal, except the one great scandal of the Popes at Avignon. It was the only one that mattered to them. No one was ever slothful at the Abbey. When they were not attending the seven daily services the monks were meditating privately in their cloisters, or employed in the ordinary farm work of a manor, digging and planting and ploughing in the fields.

On such a huge estate there was a variety of occupations, and as zealously as guardians the monks watched John for any sign of special talent or in-

clination, that they might put him to work in that direction. Young John was not aware of this, but he could not have been more skilful in avoiding work if he had been. Like a bumble-bee he blundered from flower to flower, making a great fuss and bother but never staying long enough for a net to catch him or a pin to stick him down. He was everywhere. It was the brothers' constant wonder how anybody could combine such stoutness with such agility. When they thought they had discovered an attachment in him to the blacksmith's shop he would desert the blacksmith's shop for days, and spend his time instead with the gardener in the kitchen garden. When they had set to work, and made a set of specially sized garden tools for him (for they were kind-hearted men), he would be seized with his old affection for the sheep stalls, or roam all day with the shepherd on the hills, missing his lessons until the brothers shook their heads despairingly. He was too much for them.

So it was that, at an age when most boys were already set at some task to keep them out of mischief, young John was still carefree and unburdened. He became a serious problem at Selby. Industrious themselves, the monks would not suffer idleness about the Abbey. It was a slight upon their influence and education. They could not even keep him fully occupied in church matters, for his very exuberance was their undoing, and gusto was somehow out of place in the shadowed cloisters of the church. They had to prevent him from joining even in the Nunc Dimittis, because he could not curb his hail-fellow-well-met bellow to the required solemnity. When

they vested him in church robes he looked grotesque, almost sacrilegious; and on one occasion, being allowed to swing the censer at a special service, he became so engrossed in the impetus he had worked up at the end of his chain that the smoking incense was spilled and two archdeacons almost overcome by the fumes. It was no use punishing him. His zeal was his daily fall from grace, but it was also his protection.

The worst they could do was to impose a day of silence on him, and even then his spirit was not crushed. He would lie sprawling on his pallet, or against a wall in the sun outside, his arms folded across his stomach, his chin tucked in into three chins, and a look of half-astonished, half-tolerant amusement in his pale-blue eyes. He was good for nothing — that was the brothers' conclusion, and at intervals they turned on Brother Hugh and reviled his protégé.

"Who does he think he is?" they said. "The Prince of Wales, or what?" Meaning by that not that they suspected the Prince of Wales of idleness so much as of a constant change of interest and occupation.

"Perhaps that is what he is cut out for, after all," said Brother Hugh.

"What, for the Prince of Wales?"

"No, for a soldier. . . ."

And after that they lost interest in the subject. There might be truth in what he said. A soldier's training was about the only training that Selby Abbey did not provide, and so they did not approve of soldiers. But although they stopped discussing the

matter they were still angry, and John was, if possible, in worse odour than before. Even Brother Hugh despaired of him, and indeed the only person who still felt a glimmer of sympathy for him was his first friend, the Abbot.

The Abbot was a lonely man, in spite of the great brotherhood of monks, and though they laboured and prayed and set up an example to other monasteries that no one could despise, they afforded no companionship to the Abbot. For he was a social, jovial soul, with a fine taste in good conversation and good wines, and once the actual duties of each day were over, he found his solitude irksome, and his house an empty one. He was like a king whose soldiers had all gone to the wars and had left him at home with women and weaklings. In moments of despondency he realized only too clearly that he had taken up the wrong profession, and that there was no way out. Not one of his monks could have discerned these thoughts under his pleasant exterior, for his Maker was the only One Who heard his confession of failure and unhappiness.

The Abbot had been born a youngest son, with a poor physique and a good intelligence, so naturally he had been thrust into holy orders almost before he was aware of it. His six brothers were all soldiers and landowners, for they had been born healthy and had hated book learning. And because the Abbot had displayed an aptitude for this latter accomplishment, and because his own wits were agile where his brothers' were heavy, he had been destined early for the Church, for at that time the Church often meant other things than sacred duties. The Abbot

was no more spiritually inclined than his brothers, but the Church offered opportunities of secular advancement that he could obtain in no other way. When he had been a novitiate, the affairs of the country were still entirely dictated by ecclesiastics, except when the King chose to overrule their decisions, which was pretty often. Those days had been the heydays of abbot and archbishop. They had raised up, and they had cast down. Their emissaries went from Rome to Canterbury and back again, carrying world-shattering information hidden in their long sleeves. Papal bulls and interdicts and pardons guided the erring powers of Europe, and the Pope's finger, lifted, let loose lightning or quietened the storm at will.

But the Abbot had been born just a little too late for all this, and every evening, as the shadows lengthened over the turfy grass, he sat looking out of his window, wondering at the circumstances which had smashed his ambitions, and set him in the way he should go, a way which he would never have selected for himself. One of the Rules of his Order ran:

> "Renounce your own will: bear injuries patiently: think meanly of yourself and most highly of God."

Well, he had renounced his own will. When he had been ordained he had received, with the others, the whole of his temporal possessions: two black gowns, a table-book, a knife, a needle, and a handkerchief. Even now he had not added to those prop-

erties. He would humble his body, though his spirit still might strive after worldly things. Using the perception that is born of wide horizons, he saw the old order changing, day by day, and realized, too late, that the hand of Holy Church was no longer omnipotent. There was not only a schism in the Church itself at that time. There was a schism in men's minds that would not be healed so easily. In London, in Canterbury, on any large town council, seats were being held no longer exclusively by the clergy but also by the knights. His own unintelligent brothers might guide the ship of state, while he, tremendously capable, was incapacitated up in Selby.

And behind the chairs of the knights another body stood, the powerful guild merchants, lords of the woolsack, barons of the money-bags; and potential Lord Mayors of London won their way to riches and honour, not by papal or royal decrees, but by lucky gambling with a cat.

In the ever-increasing representation of these lords and commons, in their louder and louder dissentient voice, the Abbot foresaw the eventual collapse of the Church altogether, as a control in secular affairs. The Pope was no longer omnipotent, and his doctrines were no longer infallible, in this restless turbulent island at any rate. Already at Oxford and Cambridge colleges were being set up for students who were unconnected with any Order of the saints. The Fount of Learning — that stream which had been so carefully tended and directed into the one narrow channel of the Church — had brimmed her banks and flooded over, spilling the precious waters in every direction. Anything might

happen now. The Bible might be translated into English. It needed only a generation or so, and the mighty power of Rome would be shrinking, and her voice would lose the mysterious and sublime note of authority, as learning became mere common property.

The Abbot was no fool. He sat back, metaphorically speaking, and reviewed the situation. All this would not affect the real business of the Church, which was redemption and salvation and rest. Rest came last, and was most welcome. The Church knew how to give rest, as no one else. If he could only look at matters in this impersonal way, *every* evening. "Bend thy proud wilful heart," he commanded himself. "Bend thy proud heart."

But he knew, too, in his heart, that he was *not* proud, only capable. He had come into the Church, taking it as a certain path to high promotion in statesmanship; and instead it had confined him to an abbey. He, who had meant to advise kings and princes, and to bend his able mind to the nice problems of royalty, was penned here, up in Yorkshire, settling the petty affairs of a large but easily controlled estate. Someone had blundered. Well, his life was not yet over, and he could still watch, from a distance, the smouldering dissensions of lords and Church and commons, flicker into flame — a flame which would breed other flames, which would by their own wrath fan themselves, sooner or later, into a consuming fire.

The Abbot stared up into the sky, which was plumed all over with small wisps of curling clouds, like a pigeon's breast-feathers, blue and grey and

softest pink; and staring beyond these, his mind's eye discerned the brave, topheavy pageantry of London. He would never live in London, now. His fate was always to pass through it, to sip its heady pleasures for a moment, and then to turn his back again, and ride away. He would never live in London. He would live and die here, and be buried in Selby Church. The workmen had said, when they were building it, that from the spire on a fine day they could see York plainly, seventeen miles away. But if he were to climb up there, and wait for the finest day, he would never see London lying in the distance. The Flower of Cities alle. . . .

Yet he prided himself, isolated though he was, that he kept in touch with things. Every week some friend would dine with him, and tell him the latest development at court, and through this trivial gossip he could discern the gradual trend of more momentous matters, their steady march towards a certain end. Alone at Selby he solved the problems of all England. And no one ever asked him, even out of curiosity, for his solutions. . . .

To-night, however, he passed from thinking of himself to thinking about young John. There, he thought, one has the new tradition in a nutshell. The age of pious contemplation is past. The age of self-seeking ambition, of restless search after amusement and relaxation is upon us. But that was no reason to bring it up in a monastery!

He was puzzled by John. There was no one point on which he could seize and say: "Here is the devil in the boy!" He was like a fish, squirming through one's fingers before one could discover what

kind of fish it was. But the good brothers were being demoralized by him, that was plain. Well, to-night Lemoine came to dinner. Perhaps he could offer some suggestion. The Abbot rose to his feet, patting his left hip vacantly as he went back into the room. He would never know why this habit clung to him. It was the instinct of a courtier feeling for the hilt of his sword....

2

THE hour of rest had come. The good brothers had returned from their work in the fields and were back in their dormitories. The noise of the cows returning to be milked had died away. Even the pigeons on the roof had stopped their strutting, and cooing and the church bells were silent. An evening calm lay over the Abbey. In B dormitory six brothers occupied their leisure hours in different ways. Brother Hugh was reading a book in abstruse Latin on the Seventy-Five Tortures of Saint Blenopsis. Brother Dominic was lying on his back whittling a flute of sorts out of a hollow elm-twig. Brother Applebie was sitting on the edge of his bed, concentrating all his attention upon an elaborate darn in his second-best gown, a darn which somehow, instead of lessening the hole, seemed magically to enlarge it with every stitch he took. He breathed heavily as he always did when distracted. Brother Thomas was binding a rag round the foot of Brother Linkward, who had stopped to stare at a lark singing in the sky while digging, and had mistaken his own toes for turnips. Brother Derwent was asleep,

and his snores, like the roaring of an angry lion, were the only sound in the long narrow room.

And the seventh bed, which was young John's, was empty. Contrary to instructions, the boy was still at large, and was even now couched on the bough of an apple-tree, using a sling with great effect. He had killed three robins in half an hour, and wounded a pigeon as well. He sprawled over the bough with his untidy limbs, pressing his red face through the leaves until it looked like a great red apple itself hanging there among the smaller apples. The corpses of the robins hung from his belt. Later in the evening, behind the granary, he intended to erect a little spit and cook them. Fowls and meat were forbidden in the Abbey, and that fact undoubtedly added sauce to the dish. But after the third robbin his luck was out. The birds seemed to have been warned of the death-dealing tree, and not one more approached it.

He had just made up his mind to descend when he heard the Abbey gates opening, and knew that the old porter was letting in the Abbot's guest for dinner. He changed his mind and instead crawled higher up the tree, and had just taken a firmer hold when the visitor, who had dismounted at the gate, passed below him. John held his breath, and the man paused under the tree a moment, and began to pull off his gloves, looking about him unconcernedly as a layman might on entering abbey precincts.

At that moment one of the dead robins, callously disconnecting itself from John's belt, flopped down, and hit Lemoine on the shoulder on its way to the ground. He whistled, surprised, and bent to

pick it up. Then he peered up into the tree. John's retreating form shook every leaf and every twig, though he was not actually visible. Lemoine smiled.

"Who killed Cock Robin?" he said, as if to the empty air,

"'I,' said the sparrow,
'With my little arrow,
'I killed Cock Robin.'"

Then he laughed, and moved on towards the Abbot's quarters, shaking his head over some private joke. When he had gone in, John slithered to the ground, staring after him. He had never heard the ballad of Cock Robin, and concluded that the Abbot's guest was either mad or a wandering minstrel, who had so far acquired the habit of improvising on every occasion that now he uttered spontaneously. He bent and picked up the robin, then moved off towards the granary. He would bury the birds under the grain there, until he could steal out again and cook them.

When he swaggered into the dormitory all the brothers looked up at him, except Brother Hugh, who was ashamed of him, and Brother Derwent, who was still asleep. The hour of silence had begun, so they could not question the boy, except with reproachful looks. He flopped heavily down upon his bed, and removed his shoes, kicking them across the room; then he lay on his back with his arms under his head, staring up at the stone ceiling, and whistling softly with his tongue against the roof of his mouth. He was wondering, not who killed Cock

Robin, but whether the killer of Cock Robin had been observed. . . .

3

HE had been not so much observed as divined. Lemoine knew a robin killed by fighting from a robin killed by a stone, and he would have sworn that a boy was up there in the tree. However until the nuts and wine there was no opportunity to discuss the matter, because the Abbot was interested in more political discussions, so he held his peace.

The Abbot was thoroughly enjoying himself. It was a relief to him to say things to people without the constant interjections of "Yes, Father," and he liked Lemoine's company. They sat one each end of the refectory table that some previous abbot had brought with him all the way from Ravenna, and the tall candles in the centre of it illumined his own rounded face, and Lemoine's dark bearded one. At the moment they were both absorbed in the task of cracking their nuts, and the Abbot's sleek brows met over his eyes as he tackled one that was particularly obstinate, his fine teeth showing themselves at last in a triumphant gleam as he succeeded in drawing out the whole nut from the half-shell, unblemished by a scar. He took it up in his capable beringed hand, displaying it proudly to his friend, as one might a jewel.

"Magnificent," said Lemoine. "By the way, is climbing apple-trees one of the occupations of the brethren here?"

"Not unless they do it in their spare time," said the Abbot.

"A dead robin," went on the other, "struck me on the shoulder when I was on my way here. It had come to a violent end . . ."

Illumination shone all over the Abbot's face. "It sounds to me like our John," he said.

"Our John?"

"Yes . . . the fellow that Hugh brought back from York Fair, five years ago, you know, just as one might bring a stray pig or goat. The poorer classes lose their offspring every now and then, and the Church brings them up quite competently, as a rule." He frowned down at his nut, which he was turning end to end in his fingers.

"And has *he* gone according to rule?"

"No," said the Abbot, and he leaned forward confidentially. Outside of politics Lemoine had touched on the subject most intriguing to him because most problematical. He dipped his nut into the salt.

"There is no harm in the boy," he said, "and that is just what irks the good souls here. He is just naturally idle. Spasms of idleness do not overtake him — as they overtake the best of us, at times. I would rather say that spasms of work overtook him, of very short duration." He put the nut carefully to his lips, and bit it neatly in two halves, munching it thoughtfully. "It is a problem," he said. "It makes me wonder as to the lad's parentage. These lower classes, you know, can usually be coerced into some sort of manual labour, especially at a tender age."

"You forget the Plague," said Lemoine bitterly.

"Ye-es. One blames the Plague for everything." He put the other half of the nut into his mouth and dusted his fingers lightly with his napkin. "Naturally there is a certain displacement at the moment, but you will never persuade me that the manual labourer has any serious inclination to rise above his class. And I am a landowner as well as you, Lemoine." He permitted himself a smile.

"Perhaps, but you never deal with the same conditions. Your fellows work because of their order. *Laborare est orare* and all the rest. Now the rascals on *my* estate——"

"Yes, they're difficult, aren't they?"

"My dear man, they're impossible! There's no holding them. Even the Statute of Labourers is so much waste paper. They seem to think that the Plague had given them a right to make conditions — *them!* They break their pledges to me, every day. Wages have risen preposterously. Men born on my land hold themselves no more bound to me than the most casual labourer. My fields have suffered terribly through their negligence. I haven't enough labour left to bring the harvest in. They're all migrating to the towns. They've heard some silly nonsense about life there, you know, and they think they'll make their fortunes there!"

"Leave it to Nature," said the Abbot. "These displacements are inevitable after a crisis. Nature will readjust herself in a year or so. Give her time."

"Yes. . . . You clergy are so conservative!"

The Abbot smiled and shook his head. "That's a cruel taunt to throw up at a friend, Lemoine," he said. "I don't think I'm conservative. I'm perfectly

ready to admit as a general principle that the world is fluid and not static. Most things change. But I don't think the labouring class changes. It will always exist. Someone must be the under dog and in the case of the labouring classes their own weight pulls them earthward every time. There are exceptions, of course." He filled his glass and drank, as if to the exceptions. "But I still hold to my main point. As a class they do not change. They will realize their own limits, sooner or later. They are coercible."

"Yes, the Church makes it so easy for you to coerce," said his friend. "We can only cow their bodies, and their bodies are infernally tough ——"

"So are their souls, if that's what you imply," said the Abbot. "So are their souls." They laughed together, without finishing the implication; then the Abbot went on:

"To return to John. I should like your opinion about him. The extraordinary thing is that he *won't* be coerced. He doesn't offer any active resistance, but our endeavours slip off him, like water off a duck's back. We've tried threatening, we've tried corporal punishment, we've tried this cowing of the spirit that you so gracefully accuse us of. It's been no good." He looked up suddenly at Lemoine, and was flattered by the growing interest in his eyes. "That's why I suspect the boy's parentage," he said. "There's something uncanny about it. It's not as if he were mentally deficient — on the contrary. And yet we can't touch him. Naturally when Hugh first arrived with him, I thought he was one of a litter, as empty-headed as empty-handed. We fed him and

clothed him. He ate a lot, or so they tell me. They were positively aghast at his appetite at first. But when we tried to set him to work —" he shrugged his shoulders. "As you so justly remark, a peasant's body is hard, but why couldn't we touch his spirit? We've had the education of him for five years. He can read and write tolerably well. He can apply himself — when he likes. But he *doesn't* like. . . . I tell you, Lemoine, I've had that boy in here and talked to him like a father. He is not actually offensive. He just stands and looks at me as if he didn't believe a word I was saying."

"I should like to see him," said Lemoine.

"Thank you for that," said the Abbot. "Perhaps you can suggest something we can do with him. I tell you frankly I'm at my wits' end."

The Abbot gave an order to a servant, then he and his guest rose from their chairs and walked over to the fire. Together they stood staring into its ardent leaping depth. The flames branded both their faces with temporary scars of light and shadow, flickering, grotesque. They did not speak for some minutes, each being busy with his own thoughts. . . . Then the door opened, and the servant again approached, this time followed reluctantly by John.

"Come forward into the light, boy," said the Abbot. "We can't see you there."

John advanced, dragging his feet on the stone floor. The Abbot took him by the shoulders, and shook him affectionately, in semi-reproof, turning him as he did so, so that he faced Lemoine. The boy was blinking in the blaze of the fire, and to Lemoine,

as to the bailiff of Gramercy, there suddenly leaped to mind the face and figure of Sir William.

"Well, I'm damned!" he said, forgetting his company; then, addressing the boy directly, "How long is it since YOU left Gramercy?"

The Abbot repeated the last word wonderingly. Johnny's face was blank. Once or twice in his short life he may have heard the name of the manor where he was born, but it no longer held any significance for him. Seeing that something was expected of him, he made an effort at remembrance.

"I went to the Fair," he said.

"Yes, yes, but who took you?"

"I don't know," said John. Then, after a pause: "There were two of them."

Suddenly Lemoine addressed the Abbot, as if John were no longer there.

"I could have sworn that this boy was one of Sir William Falstaff's sons," he said. "He had an estate in Yorkshire, you remember. I knew him well in London."

He went on talking to the Abbot in lower tones, but he had said enough to enlighten John. Whatever else had been forgotten the words "Sir William" had remained in his memory, and now, suddenly remembering his connection with that knight, his bosom swelled with pride and pugnaciousness. How curious that he should have forgotten that he was a knight's son! He was quite important, really. He swaggered up to the fire, between the two men, stretching his hands to the blaze, in his turn. He was as good as them. When they stopped speaking to look down at him,

"My father lives in Gloucestershire," he said. "He's a rich man. I shall be rich one day."

As suddenly as he had begun, he stopped. It was like the mouth of the sphinx opening and shutting. A faint exasperation began to express itself in the puckers at the corners of the Abbot's mouth. Lemoine was smiling all over his face. "That's done it!" he said. "I wouldn't mind taking a wager with anybody now! Sir William did live in Gloucestershire, and this lad was got on his place Gramercy."

He rose suddenly, and the golden chain round his neck and his spur rowels jingled excitingly like bridle-bells. "Somebody must have taken him to the Fair, and he lost himself there," he hazarded.

"It's the first *I* heard of his father," said the Abbot. He was obviously annoyed.

"But it proves your theory about his birth," said Lemoine. "It's curious what a small place the world is, isn't it?"

This comforting reflection pleased them both, though underneath the Abbot was still a little vexed. He had tried so often to get information out of John, and the boy had been voluble, but not helpful. Now, in front of a stranger he could throw off a piece of information like that, after all this time. . . . "My father lives in Gloucestershire." Well, his father could pay up a handsome sum now, for the board and tuition of five years. He said as much to Lemoine.

"But Sir William was killed at the Siege of Calais, I'm afraid," said Lemoine, and at that moment the short insistent bells for compline began to ring, calling the brothers to the service.

"That will do, boy. You may go," said the Abbot. In a daze John withdrew, leaving the door ajar behind him as he retraced his steps along the gusty corridors, so that the bells, jangling overhead, nearly deafened the Abbot and his guest.... But John had forgotten them. One phrase rang through his head louder than any bells. "Sir William was killed at the siege of Calais." So his father was a soldier, a soldier, hooray! He would be a soldier, too. He would go slashing and hacking and spurring through the crowds, "Grr — get out of my way! Down with all traitors! And the good broadsword by my side, hooray, hooray!"

He went prancing sideways down the corridors, curvetting on an imaginary steed, slashing with his empty arm at the empty air, and the good brothers, hurrying silently through the cloisters on their way to service, bowed their heads lower, and fixed their eyes on the ground. Young John was past praying for....

4

AFTER the clue to the boy's paternity, the last excuse for his presence in the Abbey disappeared. Despite the fact that the authorities had nothing more to go upon than the word of a child of ten, they were unanimous in their acceptance of his statement, and preparations for his departure were undertaken with most heart-felt expedition. The Abbot himself was due at Westminster the following month, for a convention which would meet to protest against the latest outbreak made by King and Parliament, against the Pope's supreme headship —

the Statute of Præmunire. The journey could be well relied on to combine urgent business with casual pleasure, and if, on the way, the Abbot could manage to dispose of John — he rubbed his hands in anticipation of so doing, and sighed a very premature sigh of relief.

The two brothers who accompanied the Abbot on these expeditions foresaw no difficulty in getting rid of their companion. They had heard of Sir William's death, and as long as the dates of his journeys to Gramercy could be found to coincide with the probable date of John's conception, it would be a hard-hearted family that could refuse him. After all, an extra child about the place would make no difference. It was only at Selby that no fitting niche could be found for him. Since the Plague, there had been a good deal of adoption going on amongst the better classes, and perhaps if the Falstaff family remained obdurate, somebody else might be found, who would like to be saddled with a nice growing child with a hearty appetite. One never knew.... The future certainly held possibilities, though nebulous at present, and on one point the good brothers were quite determined — that their ride homeward would be made without him.

Though the journey before them was long, the monks made no more preparation than if their business called them to York instead of to Westminster, for the great road which lay southwards was reassuringly supplied with houses of call, and the laity which would not put up an abbot for the night was a laity that risked unpleasant consequences. So it was that, as soon as the warmer weather made it

possible, and leaving a small margin of time for the disposal of John before the Abbot was due at the convention, they set out on their journey. The Abbot rode a powerful horse called Roger, with a deep chest and slender legs, which showed that he came of the war-horse breed. The two brothers rode geldings, and John sat the cruppers of the geldings alternately, much to his disgust. He had hoped to ride to his father's house in style, not like a meal-sack, and intended to sulk for most of the way, but his high spirits and boasting self-confidence got the better of him, and he was talking his head off before Selby Abbey had disappeared behind the first wood at the side of the road. The Abbot rode in front on Roger, in his best black gown and hood. His gloves and his shoes were ablaze with ornamentation, in great contrast to the rest of his person. He was an excellent horseman, despite his weight, and was thoroughly enjoying himself, sniffing in the rare morning air as he sniffed the bouquet of his best wines. The brothers, bouncing along behind him, did *not* ride well, and Johnny, behind one or the other of them, could not be said to ride at all. He suffered rather from a continual and enforced upheaval and collapse, with such short intervals between the two that it seemed every minute that he must become detached from his seat altogether and be shaken off into the road.

Their way lay first through York, and after York they made a détour on a moorland road. It was little more than a track, and — though on a higher level — lay parallel with another track away to the left, which had once run through the village

called Gramercy. John, soon tired of the unresponsive and apprehensive back of the brother to whom he clung, had begun to look about him, and the first thing that took his attention after York Minster was the little church of the manor on which he had been born. He was looking down on it, as he rode, and down on to the dusty white track which ran beside it, through the line of huts which once composed the village. He stared and stared, his mouth open, his blue eyes fixed wide and unblinking, trying to stir up in his consciousness the sleepy recollections of a five-year-old. He had forgotten all this. Life, for him, had started at the Fair. Or so it had seemed, until that man had come the other day, and reminded him of his father. It was curious he could ever have forgotten his father, when his father had been rubbed into him so assiduously ever since words meant anything to him. And now there was something vaguely familiar about this place that lay below him. His gaze wandered, puzzled, over the empty fields, the deserted road, the little huts, lacking the familiar smoke which had once issued through their roofs, which now were collapsing weakly one against the other, as they stood uninhabited through wind and weather. The manor house itself, behind its walls, was half-hidden in an unkempt mass of greenery, as if it too were endeavouring to be effaced as soon as possible. No. . . . The boy shook his head, and turned his attention elsewhere. It could not be any place he had ever known.

He fished in his pocket for the apples that old Brother Hugh had given him as a send-off, and began

to munch, spitting out the pips to right and left as he rode, with a gloriously vague idea in his head, of tracking his way home again (if he didn't like his father's place) by very same pips.

He was so busy with his munching and planning and holding on, that he did not bother to listen to the shouted remarks passing between his elders.

"A sad sight!" the Abbot roared, throwing the remark over his shoulder.

"Yes, Father."

"The result of the Plague, I suppose?"

"No doubt, Father. Most of the small farms round here are deserted in the same way."

"Are all the villagers dead, then?"

"Most of them, Father. Those who were spared did not care to stay, I have heard."

"Ah, no doubt, no doubt . . ." the Abbot sighed, and contributed no more to the conversation. It was too much effort. Instead he struck spurs into his horse and passed more quickly downhill than he had come up, until presently he and his companions were on level ground again, and the empty shell that had once been Gramercy lay far behind them. . . .

5

AT Falwell in Gloucestershire, Lady Falstaff was still mourning her husband's decease of six years before. He had ridden off to London as usual and embarked for France, leaving her as ignorant of instructions in case of his decease as she was heartbroken at his departure. She was a pale woman, never happy unless downtrodden, and she had grown

like a white weed at Falwell, utterly overshadowed and made sunless by her husband's uproarious personality.

And, like weeds, she had thrived under ill-treatment. Now that Sir William was gone for ever and would never again upset the daily round, the common task, she began to lose even her weedlike persistence in surviving at all, and to prepare for that steady decline into the grave which was so popular in the earlier ballads of the time, though even in that she was doomed to be out-of-fashion. There was no apparent change in her long face and lack-lustre eyes to casual guests or acquaintances, but her servants saw it. As a tide recedes, year by year, leaving a barren and infertile strand of useless soil, so her life receded, and the thin blood ebbed from her cheeks, slowly and surely. She had tried to live completely in the past, and the past would not bear to be lived in. It thrust her out cruelly, blunting her memory even to those things she had held most dear, tearing out by the roots any sharp remembrance of former days that still lingered in her heart. So she no longer even lived in the past, but subsisted somehow in the present, though having no part or parcel with it. In her blurred mind one image alone remained, the image of her husband, strangely translated, with the halo that a dog-like devotion can conjure up, reflecting its golden gleam on to his bald old head.... Day by day she sat, her hands folded on her dusty lap, staring blindly, heedlessly, into thin air, as the leaden hours crawled by. Her children shouted and played, after the manner of children, and called her name. But her name was never

her name, spoken in soft or childish accents. She could not recognize it. A dull ache still remained in the region of her heart, a craving emptiness that knew no satisfaction.

In the church that Sir William had so ill-temperedly endowed, an empty tomb, surmounted by an emaciated and surprisingly pious effigy, was memorial to him. Under the letters cut in the stone was a space large enough to contain his wife's name, and a space too at his side for her petrified counterfeit. She had lain so seldom by his side in real life. In death at least she could not be taken from him. At his feet a very poor representation of his dog Tassel cringed rat-like, after the manner of stone dogs. Tassel himself was dead long since. Like his master he had died gloriously — in a fight with the farmers' dogs, whilst industriously rabbiting on their domain.

Despite the collapse of its mistress, life at Falwell went on much as usual. Her character had never been forcible, and the place was run by the servants, as it had been run on the numerous other occasions when their master had gone to the wars. The only difference was that this time he would not return. And they were not particularly sorry for that. Indeed, they were relieved to see that his two sons and twin daughters resembled their mother rather than their father. The girls were still in the nursery, but the boys were out and about on the estate, riding gently on their ponies or studying their lessons under the beech-trees with the tutor from Gloucester Abbey. There was a good bailiff, and the income from the estate continued to fill Sir William's money-bags, though latterly there had been a

slight falling off, and labour had been harder to procure, since the Plague. Still — it would pass.

Meanwhile, the winter passed, and a new spring came, and the beech-tree twigs began to swell out at their finger-tips into the bundles which held the crushed green buds. The roads, inaccessible by mud during the winter, began to show some surface. Birds were already nesting in the slowly thickening hedges, and the air was full of the calling of young lambs and calves. Even Sir William's pale children left off coughing, and found some pleasure in the tingling air. Indeed everything was a-growing and a-blowing except Lady Falstaff, and she still drooped, unmindful of thrusting buds or running sap. The priest, who used to visit the place to offer ghostly consolation, had long since given up in despair. The sinner may be saved before the spineless, and he was thoroughly aware of the fact. So he went fishing in Sir William's streams instead, made safe from the accusation of poaching by his cloth.

And standing on the banks of the stream, his awkward skirts tucked up about him, he was the first to see young John's homecoming. The arrival was unexpected, and the priest would probably have forgotten it next day, but for one incident: the two horses with their black-hooded riders had come trotting by him, and on the crupper of the second horse was an ungainly boy, whose fair shock of hair rose and fell with every movement of his mount. The boy stared at the strange priest, and the priest, seeing something curiously reminiscent in the face of the boy, stared too. Then, as if realizing his rudeness, he had waved a kindly hand. The boy was a

good way past by this time, of course, but he was still looking backwards, and it seemed to the priest that he had raised his hand too, putting it to his nose, and extending all five fingers in unmistakable derision....

The priest went back to his fishing, but he did not catch anything that day.

6

THE Abbot had taken leave of John in London. For the night the Boar's Head had housed them, and young John had slept the sleep of the just, or of the crupper-sore. And by the light of a very inadequate candle the Abbot had written to Lady Falstaff, explaining the existence of the boy and her responsibility in the affair. Then he folded the letter and sealed it, pressing his big finger-ring down into the smoking wax, and looking almost tenderly in the direction of his charge, who was sprawled over the bed in careless grandiloquence of pose, his legs and arms spreadeagled.... He breathed heavily.

The Abbot rose stiffly from his seat and stretched himself, then taking up the candle he went over to the bed, and stood looking down at the sleeper. There was some quality about the lad that *got* him, and, with the parting of the ways so imminent, D.V., he could afford to indulge in sentiment. The long journey had tanned John's face to so deep a brown that it appeared almost as if a flush of rage had suffused it, and this impression was increased by his tufted eyebrows, now almost white, which had been drawn together in a terrifying

frown, perhaps in the stress of a moment's dream. The Abbot shook his head and smiled.

"Good-bye, John," he said, slowly. "The Church is well rid of you. But I can't help feeling that if you'd put your mind to it, you'd have made as good an abbot as ever I did. Yes, as ever I did." He shook his head again, feeling it was the right thing to do. This melancholy was really rather pleasant. Then he bent down to touch the boy's head with a blessing from his fingers. But at that moment John squirmed angrily under the dirty cover, and began to scratch his armpit in the hasty engrossed fashion of those still half-asleep. Then he returned to his careless snoring again.

But the Abbot had taken the hint. A suitable farewell would never be said now, on either side, and as he took up his cloak and was descending the narrow stairs, the slightest shiver of disgust convulsed his whole frame. Yes, London might be well enough for those that liked it, but at least their bed-linen was less foul at Selby.

7

Falwell accepted the gift of young John in the same apprehensive apologetic spirit with which it had been proffered. There was no active opposition from anyone to his reception, and in a week he had settled in as if he had been born and bred there. Lady Falstaff smiled wanly on him at first, noticing him far more than her own offspring, once more because of his ferocious likeness to Sir William. But after a while she again sank back into apathy,

and John was left to rule the roost, which he did with great effect. At first he had been irked by the mildness of the air after the North, and by the smaller quarters, but then there were no restrictions here, and that more than made up for the smaller space. At first too, there had been a little confusion as to who was master. Master William Falstaff, nearly eight years old, had taken it upon himself to show Master John Falstaff round the estate, and to expatiate rather condescendingly while doing so. And Master John had suffered with unusual docility this monopoly of conversation, until they reached the farmyard.

"This," said Master William, waving his hand, "is our farm."

"Really?" said Master John, "and what is that?" pointing guilelessly to the manure-heap which filled the centre of the yard. (They were standing together on the edge of the cobbled path which led to the cow-house.) Master William was about to answer, when Master John pushed him in the face and sent him sprawling into the muck below him, scaring the hens and the grey sow who had been rooting there. Master William yelled as he fell, from fright, disgust and anger, but any sound he may have made was utterly swallowed up in his companion's laughter. John was rolling about, barely able to keep on his feet, with the tears pouring down his face, and his two hands clasping his stomach. When his breath returned a little, he gasped out:

"I'll tell you what that is, clever little Willy! That's the manure-heap and you're in it!" Then off he went again, with ha-ha-ha and ho-ho-ho, until

actually he suffered almost as much physical inconvenience as his victim. John had the hearty carefree laughter of the true bully. The fact that his half-brother was two years younger than himself, and much smaller, weighed nothing in his scales of Justice. He would have knocked the twin sisters in, if he thought they needed it.

After that, he was undisputed master of the house. Even the tutor from Gloucester Abbey was nervous of him, being a small man and slow-witted. John's vocabulary frightened him off before anything else did, for the boy had a prodigious memory and never forgot an effective word. His expletives, which had been neglected at the Abbey, flourished now from contact with the servants and farm people, and even his stepmother looked at him in mild surprise. Sir William himself had never talked like this. His tongue ran on like the brook babbling in the beechwoods. Such incessant gossiping terrified her, and she retired with her women, out of the sound of it, leaving her stepson to rule the great hall, and to direct the servants.

John looked askance at one person only — the bailiff. His last experience with a bailiff had taught him that they were a surly crew, and he kept out of this one's reach as much as possible. The farm people spoilt him with fruit and with other favours, as they would have spoilt the other children, if they ever saw them, and soon there were no secret places left on the estate that John had not poked and pried into. He was in and out of Falwell buttery and bakehouse all day long, never emerging without something to eat in his hands and in his pockets, and

while his half-brothers sat struggling with their French and Latin in the dark dampness of the smaller hall, he would go whooping like a Red Indian past the window, on one or other of their favourite ponies, with half a dozen screaming puppy-hounds behind him. As a consequence they disliked and feared him, shunning him in their leisure hours, searching to discover some cubbyhole where they would be safe from his mischievous vulgarity of mind (for they credited him with their own painstaking methods of revenge). They were solemn and delicate children, with hideous tempers secreted away under their small exteriors. If they were insulted or annoyed, the insult and annoyance bit like iron into their souls, and dreadful humiliations and reconciliations took place before all was well again. In fact, they had all the virtues with which John was not acquainted, and all the vices which had been left out of him for lack of room. Though they were ill-tempered, they were steadfast and honourable. They bore their physical troubles without complaining, and were kind to their twin sisters because they saw that it pleased their mother, and because they liked to feel they were helping helpless things. Indeed, despite the extreme tenderness of their age, they had already realized the responsibility of being alive at all, and of having to conduct their bodies gingerly through this vale of tears so that their souls should not suffer hereafter.

John, on the contrary, forgot the existence of his soul as much as he forgot the existence of his lungs and liver, and it troubled him as little as these. He grew like the coarser country flowers, exuber-

antly, gaudily, joyfully, entirely unconscious of any universe other than this one, and thinking of this one only as revolving round himself. He lived entirely in the present. Even the vague ambition to be a soldier as his father had been was still a subconscious one; its fulfilment somewhere in the dim remote years ahead which were not worth considering until they were upon him. He had been at Selby. Now he was at Falwell. There was no need to worry about being somewhere else until he found himself transplanted there, as he had a way of doing.

Meanwhile he enjoyed himself at Falwell after his own fashion, filling each new day with vigorous occupation, or lazing away the soft afternoon hours with a generous abandonment that suggested Eastern rather than Saxon blood.... And Falwell adapted itself, willy-nilly, to meet the rampant expanding needs of the bastard Falstaff, unable to ignore his masterful presence though at present still able to endure it.

8

In the fourteenth century the flowers of chivalry grew in fertile soil, and each decade managed to produce, without much effort, a *preux chevalier* head and shoulders above all other gentlemen. London was a very hotbed or these heroes, and gave honour where honour was due with a deal of shouting and cheering, a great show of bunting and ribbons, and a jostling sweating crowd that pressed almost under the harassed hoofs of the horse that bore their idol. In such an atmosphere chivalry

budded and bloomed: the misery of thousands of poor people was forgotten, even by the poor people themselves, in applauding the triumph of One, the hero of all heroes, who combined every virtue in his own person. The Black Death itself was forgotten when the Black Prince rode down Cornhill.

And memories were conveniently fickle, ever ready to supplant the waning sun with a fresh illuminant, sometimes even supplanting the sun before it had begun to wane at all! The desire for a hero was inherent in the blood, and in that thriving lively time the saints of the Church, who had served well enough in the past as objects of worship, lost their strongest hold over the people. *They were not alive.* They might have been heroic once — and indeed the altar-pieces in the churches, with their painted martyrdoms, were graphic and horrible enough for the most bloodthirsty churchgoer — but they did not live and breathe and have their being in London — they could not ride down Cornhill, or respond with gracious gesture and benign address to their admirers. It was as if, with this century, England had ceased to be a country of vagrant impressions; with the increasing solidity and prosperity of the larger cities, and the organization and formation of their civil opinion, this desire of the mass for a Hero had reached its highest peak. The memory of Edward I glimmered like an inextinguishable lamp in the hearts of those who remembered him, and led them rightly or wrongly to expect a similar heroic standard from other royalty. And at the moment they were not disappointed. The Prince of Wales fulfilled nearly every rule of chivalry, though a little

too staid and sober for complete approval. The populace applauded and respectfully adored him. But they did not love him as their children were to love a later Prince of Wales, Harry Monmouth, whole-heartedly, overwhelmingly, more completely than they loved any other man or institution that had existed then, or before then, or would exist hereafter. Prince Edward was a shade too impeccable. One naughty gleam in his eye, one suggestion of the fact that he was human like themselves, suffered the same temptations, underwent the same ordeals, felt the same thrill of pleasure, succumbed in the same way to pain, would have endeared him to the populace as nothing else would have done. It would have been the finishing, the human touch. Still, he was young, and brave and handsome — and Prince of Wales. London loved him, and the other cities followed suit.

The reasons for the Hundred Years' War between France and England will never properly be explained, and if the men who participated in it could rise from their graves to tell us we should be none the wiser, nor would they, for the repeating of the things they were told so long ago. No one reason can suffice for so protracted and interrupted an occupation. Nowadays we think of a king of France and a king of England, one ruling a geographically blue country and the other a pink, organizing battles with the precision and punctuality of Cup Finals, refereed by the Pope, and ending with a winning and a losing side, while the score remains in that condition until the game begins again. No war was ever like that, least of all the

Hundred Years' War, and the mediæval point of view certainly recognized no pink and blue countries, for Europe itself was as multi-coloured and divided up as a patchwork quilt. To the Englishman — quite a recent product at that time — France was part of England, and should be under her control as much as Ireland and Wales and Scotland. From a chivalrous and soldierly point of view it was fun trying to get France to agree to this, and well worth while when one considered the loot. From a superstitious point of view the whole war was due to a spell laid on Philip de Valois, who in attempting to be revenged on one Englishman, drew the whole of England against him. From an economical point of view the manufacturing towns of Flanders, the Artois and the duchy of Brabant, were vital necessities for English trade, both for receiving the wool from her eastern counties, and for the coast-line they afforded, which would enable King Edward to rid the sea of the French skirmishers who at present endangered his merchandise, and added to ordinary perils of the sea the unnecessary peril of piracy.

The war, too, was like quicksilver: when it vacated one territory it only meant that it had overflowed into another. There were seldom any real truces for rest and recuperation, for the simple reason that the war was not controlled by the two kings — the two kings were controlled by the war. The king of France did not only disagree with the king of England, but also with the king of Navarre and the dukes of Brabant and Burgundy. The king of England had other enemies than the king of France — his own unruly lords. The war itself was

not a bitter struggle between two outraged countries, with injuries which could only be wiped out in blood, so much as an amicable yet ceaseless wrangling between relations over matters of estates. (For every important house in France and England was interrelated by then, so that often first cousins were on opposing sides.)

What the war really amounted to was that independent excursionists from England crossed the Channel light-heartedly at different times with their own small armies and joined in the skirmishing when they found it, and, if they didn't find it, started another small skirmish for themselves. And France in her turn, having silenced for a while the various dukes who disagreed with the King, made her way to the coast-line in an attempt to wrest back her own anglicized towns. There was no particular desire on either side to meet the opponent, and indeed when this happened both parties went to some lengths to prevent a *rencontre*. For the way of war was to march along a deserted road, arrive at a walled town, lay siege to it, capture it, loot it, and march either onwards or home again. Actual encounters on a large scale with the enemy were so few and far between that they were honoured with the name of battles, but the real war was just skirmishing between one duke's faction and another, for the sake of ransom, rapine or revenge.

Sir John Mowbray, Earl of Nottingham, owned extensive estates in the South of England and the Midlands. His name was one of the great names of the country, associated at different times, like other great names, with treason and loyalty, ban-

ishment and reward. Lady Falstaff had been a Mowbray by birth, and still turned to her eldest brother in times of trouble for sympathy and advice.

Two years later when the war began, officially, again, the Black Prince travelled from Dover to Calais and marched inland. Members of his staff joined him from time to time, and Sir John Mowbray intended to cross when the first favourable winds arrived. At the moment he was staying at Sandwich, waiting for this, and for a new page overdue from Gloucestershire. He did not particularly want a page just now, and had two sons of his own who could have fulfilled that post at a pinch, but he was taking the boy to oblige his only sister, because he was a trouble at home, and needed a father's discipline. As he had already taken a squire who needed a mother's sympathy, Sir John hoped fervently that no further offices would be required of him, especially as his kindness was accepted so tardily. Kindness sat awkwardly upon him, and just now he felt far too angry for any such sentiment. The three ships which were to have been waiting for him at Sandwich had sailed the day before, chartered by some rascal who wanted to get there first, and instead he had been offered two leaking old cockle-shells which would founder as soon as they were out of the lee of the land, and for the hire of these he had been asked more than he had intended giving for the seaworthy ones. The swifter shallower vessels, commissioned by the Prince, had crossed some weeks before, crammed with archers and men-at-arms. Sir John chafed and fumed to join him.

His presence was not vital to the success of the campaign, but he hated to be out of things, and on this occasion Fate seemed determined to delay him by every sort of pretext. His favourite horse had fallen sick on the road. His best suit of armour had been left behind to have the chain-mail rewelded, and the armourer had eloped with the blacksmith's daughter. And now this pesky boy had not arrived, and instead of the page waiting on his master the master was waiting on the page. It was really very tiresome of his sister. He supposed she had forgotten to send him off at the proper time, but then she had always been unpunctual. He called his squire impatiently. He was tired of sitting alone in the best room of the little inn that fronted on the sea.

"Fleance!"

The squire, who had been loitering in the passage, flirting with the chambermaid, jumped as he heard his name called with that particular inflexion. He put his head rather slowly round the door, and followed it still more slowly by the rest of his handsome person.

"Sir?" he said.

He was a young man with slender limbs and with a face whose features were so finely cut as to be almost feminine. He looked as if he had outgrown his strength, and a certain prominent vein in his temples and the narrowness of his shoulders showed a physique too delicate to promise any robustness of health in the future. Sir John frowned at him as he lingered in the doorway, his long white fingers still on the latch. The boy would never make a soldier, and Sir John esteemed above everything a

soldier's profession. Well, he had nobody but himself to blame for adopting orphans. He frowned still more.

"No news yet?"

"I'm sorry, sir. There's a fishing smack out to the north, that I thought at first ——"

"You and your thoughts! We shall never get to France at this rate! How's the horse?"

"Still trembling, sir. I gave him a squirt of wine up both nostrils as you suggested. He's lying down now. The innkeeper says he doesn't think he'll get up again, but he has a brother — a priest. He says if you'd like a prayer or two said. The wine doesn't seem to have done anything."

"Yes, I suppose I can get a prayer said for the success of our arms in France, too! It's about as much help as they're likely to get from me if things go on like this! Any news of the boy yet?"

"No, sir. I sent Barmwell along the road this afternoon, to keep a look-out."

"Well, go and see if he's back yet." Sir John turned away abruptly, and walked to the window again, adding over his shoulder: "And tell them to build a fire in here, as you go. It's damnably cold for August."

Fleance closed the door behind him quietly. Sir John could hear him going just as quietly down the passage. Yes, he was far too quiet and ladylike altogether! The window was misted over from the salt spray and the driving rain, but though it was invisible he knew that the grey Channel lay ahead of him. On the other side of it what glorious happenings might not be in progress? He almost

gnashed his teeth in despair. Even a dull existence at court was better than this, or home life, in the midst of ease and plenty.... There was nothing to do, that was the plague of it, nothing to do at all but sit and shiver, and wait for something, *anything* to happen. He paced restlessly up and down the room, his long sleeves swinging out like wings behind him, and ripping every now and then on the rowels of his spurs, for though the earl was in undress uniform he seldom removed his sword and spurs.

In the yard of the inn Fleance found the group of personal men-at-arms, who, born and bred on Sir John's many estates, had been selected from them, and were now pledged to make their lord's quarrel their own. Most of them had been overseas before and standing in the drizzle did not make them too keen to go again. The youngest of them was feeling homesick already, but they jeered at him. "Wait till you're *seasick!*" they said, "that's far worse!"

When the young squire came out they clustered about him eagerly, expecting news, but being disappointed of it despondence soon settled on them again, and the rain beat down on their patient leather-covered shoulders, and on their helmets — the only piece of armour about them.

"My good *fellows,*" said Fleance, in polite desperation, "why aren't you in the kitchen, keeping dry?"

"She's turned us out," said one.

"She says she can't move an inch."

"She says we smell and that we haven't washed since last Christmas, and that the rain'll clean us up a bit."

They repeated these opinions without the glimmer of a smile. It was not their business to smile, only to give reasons when asked for them. Besides, it was quite true — they *did* smell. They had had enough to do on the estates without washing, goodness knows. And now there was nothing to do at all, except wait out here in the rain, and that was even worse.

"When are we going to France?" they asked.

"Not yet. There are no ships, and your master's horse is sick. Is Barmwell back yet?"

"No . . ." They shivered. It *was* cold for August. Then they turned to go back to the shelter that the cow-houses afforded them.

Fleance went out of the gate and up the road, pondering on the uneven tempers of innkeepers' wives. He knew that he ought to expostulate with this one for refusing the one thing she was qualified to give to the men, hospitality. But he knew also that she would answer him with excellent excuses. Her inn was a respectable inn. She had started it for casual travellers, pilgrims, and learned young gentlemen pausing on their way to the universities at Paris and Milan. And now, since this war with France, she was expected to house all the rabble that poured into the village, both outward and homeward bound. That was not what *her* inn was for. Besides, she knew the way of these soldiers, always poor, always promising to pay when they got the money. That was not good enough for her. She must have cash down. For all she knew Sir John might get captured or killed in France, and she would never see the colour of his money at all. Yet

in spite of that she was housing him, because she liked gentry, and because she was serving her country by doing so, and because one mouth more or less made little difference. But this *rabble!* No, Fleance would not risk her remarks about the rabble. Once the rain stopped their plight wouldn't be so bad, and those wretched ships might turn up any moment. God! How miserable the whole world looked, when it rained! His long handsome legs in their parti-coloured tights were wet up to the knees from walking through the grass at the side of the road, but even that was preferable to the soggy muddiness of the road itself. Bed was the only place on a day like this, with a pretty bedfellow to share it. As he walked he fell to wondering about his chances with the chambermaid, and was so deep in this occupation that he would have let Barmwell and the boy pass him by, if they had not pulled up and hailed him.

"Oh, sir!" said the voluble Barmwell. "You're wet, sir! Hasn't it been a day, sir? You shouldn't be out in the rain like this! The boy's here, sir! The man who brought him said he lost him in Westminster on the way."

Fleance spoke to the boy. "What's your name?" he said brusquely. He did not approve of pages, having not long risen from that class himself.

"John Falstaff," said the boy. "What's yours?"

Fleance was taken aback. Impudence was what he should have expected, and for that very reason he was annoyed by it. He did not answer the boy's inquiry, and on Barmwell's dismounting he took the proffered horse, and rode on ahead to warn Sir John. . . .

In the front room of the inn, John stood dripping, careless of the little pool that was forming at his feet. His yellow hair had been allowed to grow to the sleeker length required of pages, and now hung in seaweed strands down the sides of his cheerful red cheeks. The earl eyed him with disfavour. His sister had not mentioned how much the boy resembled his father, and there had been no love lost between Sir William and Sir John. He was a great stout boy, too, more fit for a soldier than a page, as pages went these days. If you wanted to get on with the ladies you must have small neat pages for them to toy and play with, as they toyed and played with their dogs.

"When are we going to France?" said John.

" 'Sir . . .' " added Sir John, scowling furiously. "When you address me you call me 'sir,' and you will not address me unless you are spoken to! Fleance, take this youngster off, and see him fed. And teach him manners," he added, as the pair of them went out of the door.

"When are we going to France?" repeated John, as Fleance and he went down the passage towards the kitchen, "and what's your name? How many soldiers have we got, and can I have a horse of my own? I always had a horse at home, a piebald, they say it's unlucky so they wouldn't let me bring him, his name was Fitz. What's your horse's name? Shall I have a sword of my own? I think the French are swine, don't you?"

"My father was French," said Fleance, hoping that he managed to convey a gentle irony in his tone.

"Oh," said John, unabashed. "Why do we eat in the kitchen?"

9

JOHN did not stay long enough at Sandwich to learn his duties as a page. Within two days another assortment of ships arrived, and Fleance had commissioned and provisioned a couple for his lord, who rejoiced to see that two of his friends intended crossing simultaneously with him, a fact which certainly reduced both expenses and the danger of piracy. During this time John saw very little of Sir John, and Fleance chose to ignore him, being busy about other things. The rain still fell, and the men-at-arms still sheltered miserably in the outhouses, so that John, unaware of their existence, was deprived of their company. He spent all his time in the kitchen, sharpening a short sword, more like a dagger, that he had brought from Gloucestershire, and being made much of by the women of the house. Since his arrival the chambermaid had had no eyes for Fleance, and fawned upon John, plying him with food and kisses, both of which he accepted equably, with no great discrimination of either. Fleance sulked in the background, wondering how it was that the boy, so obviously unattractive, should attract. At mealtimes, being nice in his own habits, he affected to be disgusted at John's homelier ones, and exhorted him, with a two-edged sword of sarcasm, to improve them.

But there was no time for anybody's improvement. With astonishing suddenness a spirit of urgent

hurry fell upon everyone, and shouting and running to and fro took the place of sighing and sleeping the hours away. Sir John never lost sight of his ships for a minute, spending all his time in the harbour, fearful of being cheated of them at the last. Finding such an indefatigable overseer ready provided, the couple of lords who had joined him remained comfortably in the village as long as possible, waiting for a favourable wind. Meanwhile their own men-at-arms began a quarrel with Sir John's and battle would have been done before ever the Channel was crossed if Fleance had not exerted all his talent for diplomacy. Johnny still ate, and sharpened his short sword, evading the chambermaid in the latter end with puzzled persistence.

He was so completely concerned with himself that he could never be bothered to inquire into other people's reasons of behaviour, even when these inconvenienced him. They had told him he was to go to France with a nobleman who would have been his uncle if he had been legitimate, who was very kind to take him at all, and who would treat him well if he was a good boy and did what he was told. But the first part of the sentence was all that young John ever heard. Admonitions and advice trickled through his ears with the painstaking soliloquy of a mountain stream. He was to go to France, that was enough. Anything might happen in France....

Though the favourable wind arrived eventually, it was spasmodic in its attentions, and the five squat little vessels lay becalmed at night, in mid-Channel, drifting slightly with the tide. It was August, and a full moon showed the travellers silver

sheets of heaving water around them, with the enclosing shadowy arm of the French coast-line ahead. The soldiers, making the best of their cramped quarters between high poop and stern, sang popular songs and ballads, and the horses, stalled closely together in the dingy, nearly air-tight depths of the lower deck, slipped and recovered themselves, snorting with terror. They had been led on through a door in the ship's side like the great door of a castle. Once in they had been seamed up and caulked in, as if they would never see the light again. Indeed, if the walls of the lower deck had been transparent, the only light visible would have been a watery one, for they were well below sea level.

The three lords travelled together on the Earl of Nottingham's largest ship. Fleance served them with meat and wine on deck, and John was deputed to stand at his master's elbow. He did this casually, leaning on the chairback more as if some whim were being satisfied than performing a part of the day's routine. Behind him the great canvas of the sail hung lifeless, unable to help the craft below until the wind should blow it once more into being. It was a quiet night. The water was lapping at the sides of the vessels as they lay curtseying lightly on its surface, their sails shrivelled and dead, like the wings of enormous butterflies. From the other ships the soldiers' voices singing and the moonlight shining down — picking out their helmets with Rembrandtesque illumination — added to and emphasized the remoteness of their position. From each of their bows a lantern hung, glowing palely, catching the eye as if an invisible chain linked lantern to

lantern, ship to ship, in a charmed circle. John was strangely moved. He had never experienced anything quite like this. It was beautiful. It was as if the ships were dancing softly, moving to some other melody which lay under the water — as if the men's voices, strong and tender, ascending from each individual vessel, went surging upwards drawn by the moonlight, or something higher even than the moonlight, converging above into some supernal harmony of the upper air. The voices of the monks singing at Selby Abbey had never moved him as this moved him. Surely God's choir was a choir of the open air, a soldier's choir, like this.

In the country he had often seen great slanting slabs of light rising, after the heat of the day, from lakes and rivers and being sucked up into the sky. That was how these voices were, rising inevitably, beautifully, being sucked up and absorbed as the light was, by something or someone. He supposed God existed. The Abbot had seemed quite sure of it. It was queer. Why couldn't one *see* Him? How could people be sure, if they had never seen Him? No. He shook his head. It wasn't good enough, not for him, anyway. As suddenly as it had come, the mood of exaltation left him, and he became conscious only of the conversation at the table. He transferred his weight to the other hip, standing like a tired pony, and leaning his stubborn chin on his arm, which still extended along the back of the chair. Sir John and his guests had reached the boasting stage, where everyone talks and nobody listens. They were enjoying themselves hugely.

"And I said to him, 'My dear man, I'm sure

you'll forgive the advice of an old campaigner. I was at Calais with your father. Believe me, as long as you leave matters in the hands of that scoundrel ——' "

"I know. I've told him the same thing. 'Philip,' he said, 'You're the one man, except Mowbray, of course, whose word is as good as his bond.' "

"Yes, but d'you know Lionel? Lionel's the boy for me. He's been down to my place once or twice, always hard up of course. I lend and I lend. It's a good policy with royalty."

"Everybody lends nowadays. Nobody ever gets paid back. I don't suppose any of us'll ever get paid back for what we've spent on this war. The loot's not worth it, really. Hard cash. Hard cash." The speaker caught John's eye fixed on him, sardonic, uninterested. "Who's this?" he said. "Where did you pick up *this,* John? What's happened to the little boy with the mole on his cheek? I liked him."

"Lady de Ribeaumont has him," said Sir John unwillingly. He felt he had made a bad bargain over his new page, but desirous of not showing his shame, he waved him forward.

"One of my late lamented brother-in-law's bastards," he said. "I took him for Anne's sake. He was a nuisance at home. He'll be a nuisance everywhere, as far as I can see. Well, John, got a word to say for yourself?"

John shook his head. His thirteen years would not justify him before this assembly. He looked at the man who had first drawn attention to him, looked away again, and yawned. It might have been a coincidence, but the yawn overtook him with ex-

aggerated deliberation. Before his mouth had finished gaping the man struck him across the face, intending to follow up corporal with verbal correction. But the boy was too quick for him.

"God damn you and the devil twist your guts!" he shouted. "Who do you think you are to touch *me?*" and he snatched off the lord's velvet cap and flung it overboard. Turning again to continue his onslaught he saw a bald dome, revealed by the removal of the headdress, in all its innocence of hair. His rage ceased suddenly, and instead laughter like lava bubbled up inside him. It looked so *funny*. He had never seen anything so funny. First the surprised indignant face beneath, and then this toadstool effect above. That was what it was like — a large white domed toadstool, shining grotesquely in the moonlight. He clung to the ship's edge for support. "Oh, gosh!" he said, gasping. "Oh, golly! — you don't know how funny you look!" His laughter was dreadful. It was so innocent, so hearty. It reverberated across the water to the other ships and set the soldiers chuckling, though they were ignorant of the joke. That was the kind of laugh it was. The three knights still sat astounded in their places, staring at the culprit, who was squirming in delicious agony against the banisters that fenced the deck. If John had been a spotted hyena instead of an undisciplined boy, they could not have stared at him in more surprise. Had they a madman to deal with, they wondered? How else could they account for the unexpected onslaught, the furious volubility, subsiding so suddenly into this mere apprentice merriment? They looked from the boy to one another,

speechless, then back to the boy again. By now he was leaning on his stomach over the banisters, peering down into the water, where the jewel in the lordly cap, picked out by the inquisitive acquisitive moon, shone like the smallest lantern of the very smallest boat.... Though sodden it was still floating, with an incongruous jauntiness.

"Fleance," said Sir John huskily to that newly returned individual, "take the boy away, he's crazy!"

His guests nodded to confirm the fact, and tapped their foreheads with unnecessary and drunken emphasis. Fleance went up to John, and took him forcibly by the arm.

"You'll come with me," he said. John surprised him by offering no opposition. He came obediently, and when they were out of earshot of the knights grew very confidential.

"I chucked that old fool's hat overboard," he said. "Did you see how bald he was? If I was as bald as that I'd plant grass seed!" Looking up, he saw Fleance's solemn face.

"You want a damn good thrashing," said Fleance.

"The kind that hurts you more than it hurts me, I suppose," said John. "That's what the Abbot used to say. It hurt him so much in the end that he gave up doing it."

"Yes. You're very smart, aren't you?" said Fleance bitterly. "That's what comes of being bastard. You've got to be cheeky to get on in the world. Do you think behaving as you did to-night will do you any good? If it weren't for the fact that

we were at sea, you'd be sent home immediately."

"If I'm insulted," said John, "I'm insulted. I don't mind being beaten any more than the rest, but I'm not going to be struck as if I were a puppy." He drew his brows down over his eyes, and pressed his lips tightly together, frowning horribly. For a moment Fleance felt a curious compassion for him. The boy *was* such a puppy, such an ignorant helpless leggy puppy, friendless in a none too friendly world. He was about to make some consoling remark when the arm he was still holding began quivering and shaking again. John had forgotten to be cross already, and was giggling, silently, continuously, helplessly, collapsing against Fleance, and letting his flaxen head fall familiarly against the squire's shoulder:

"Oh, Gawd, you should have seen his face when I pulled that sitting hen off his head!" he said.

10

ONCE landed in France the Earl of Nottingham was not long in joining his Prince. The coastal cities were temporarily English in sympathy, owing to their import trade in wool, and offered every assistance to wandering knights. The days were warm and bright, and the nights cool. Sir John rode at the head of the procession between his two friends. The three squires came next, each with a spare horse carrying their lord's extras and valuables. After them came the pages, mounted too, and after the pages tramped the men-at-arms, and the odd armourers, miners, carpenters and cooks that composed a

fighting force. France lay smiling under an azure sky, as undisturbed as if a Good King out of a fairy story were ruling her lovely acres, instead of the reality of contentious factions besieging and burning her strongholds and destroying her crops.

John looked about him appreciatively as he rode. On their arrival in Calais the earl had provided him with new apparel, and now he was tricked out gorgeously — too gorgeously by far for Sir John's present circumstances. He had already spent so much on the war that there was very little over for clothes. Still, other people judged one by the way one dressed one's dependants, and the earl was human. The safe arrival of their ships at Calais had made him forget, as completely as if it had never happened, the incident in mid-Channel, and his sole concern now was for his retinue to make as good an appearance as possible before his Prince. He had dressed the boy in a handsome pair of tights, one leg checked like a chess-board, and the other scarlet. Scarlet brocade covered him to the thighs, belted with an embossed belt of gold-leaf and alloy, and springing out over the hips in stiff elaborate folds like the outspread petals of an enormous hollyhock. The sleeves hung full and loose, lined with the same chequered pattern of the tights, and their wide mouths were scalloped. On his head a scarlet cap with scalloped hangings repeated the pattern of the sleeves. Round his neck hung a chain of gold-leaf and alloy, and his feet were encased in red leather shoes, buckling high around the ankles, and attenuating to a point five inches long. Spurs clinked at his heels, and his short sword hung at his side. It was

a magnificent *ensemble,* and anything more difficult for fighting could never be devised. Still, he would be well out of the way of the fighting, waiting at the edge of the battle with the other pages with drinks and bandages and extra mounts, and meanwhile he looked good on horseback. Sir John thought so, and John thought so too, though Fleance never looked in his direction without shading his eyes.

But in the main everybody was happy and occupied, slowly following up the track of the Prince's army with a kindly sun and just suspicion of wind enough to keep their faces cool. Even the peasants, used to these gorgeous calvacades a dozen times a day, stopped and stared as Sir John's retinue went by, amazed at such array.

And, as if the Lord had held up the best battle of the lot until his arrival, Sir John was in time for Poictiers. He was grateful that he had not missed it, because the odds were certainly fearful, and the victory would be so much the more magnificent. He went into it joyfully, spurring his horse into the thick of the fight, with the ever-cautious Fleance at his side, warding off blows, ready if not to catch at least to break the fall of his lord if some ill-tempered blow should throw him from the saddle. Sir John Mowbray, in full armour, was no easy proposition to get on to his feet. . . .

Something happened to John at Poictiers. He took no active part in the battle, staying amongst the spare horses as he had been instructed. But he did not, as he had also been instructed, keep his eyes fixed on Sir John's helmet, in the thick of the fighting, and dash forward with another horse when he

saw Sir John capsized. Something had happened to him. He was hardly aware of the other pages grouped around him, betting on the results of the engagements. He was hardly aware of the mêlée of cries that filled the air, the "God and St. Denis!" "God and St George!" "St. George and Calais!" for the noise was continuous and discordant, like the harsh calling of crows as they wheeled, blackening the air above one's head. The English long-bowmen, drawn up line on line, drew music from their death-dealing bows as line on line of harpers might do, plucking their strings in the full ecstasy of battle. They made three sequent sounds as they used their bows: there was the rustling crackling sound as the arrows were drawn from the quiver and fitted into place; the whirring humming noise of the strings, unleashed from the taut arms, and springing back to place again; followed by the high-pitched almost tender moan of the barbed arrows as they leapt forward, finding their mark with deadly emphasis.

Poictiers was the triumphant hour of the long-bowmen. Beside their serried ranks the clutter of individual battle that went on in the centre of the field, the hacking and slashing and bashing on the head, was amateur and out of place. The clipped swans' feathers that tailed the arrows seemed to have infused the very spirit of flight — the narrow head, the outstretched neck, the powerful velocity — into the instruments of destruction they adorned. They sped forward with unerring purpose into the vulnerable part of almost every victim. Nothing could stand up against them. The Viennese cross-bowmen, especially imported, broke rank and left

their complicated heavy crossbows where they stood, with the handles which should crank up the machines into action scattered over the field and lost. The longbows rejoiced over them. Simple and beautiful in line and curve, they inspired of necessity simple and beautiful actions in the men that used them — legs sturdily planted, head thrust back, arms raised in continuance of the broad line of the shoulders. Out of the few movements, following one upon another, there grew a giant rhythm, and out of the giant rhythm grew a giant confidence that nothing could destroy. Those few long-bowmen could have met and beaten the entire French army that day, unaided by mounted forces. The curve of their six-feet bows was the replica of the curve of God's forefinger, thundering down destruction from Sinai. The swift agony of their arrows was the agony imposed by a divine fury against the French. They were invincible, almost immortal. It seemed that the ground they defended so gallantly must bear for ever after them the imprint of the placing of their feet; that where the few amongst them fell, the fallen yewbows should take miraculous root, and yew-trees grow, sombre and strong, to the memory of the hands that held and the eyes that took aim.

Young John came of age that day. His thirsty mind drank in the scene before him. Dust, smoke, sparks, curses, yells and blood filled the vineyard of Poictiers that had become a battlefield. John knew no Battle-hymn of the Republic, but he saw men that day trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath were stored, and his eyes beheld the glory of it. Past and future faded into insig-

nificance. The Moment became supreme. The thunder of the horses' hoofs as they carried their riders into battle beat down the Moment into the earth beneath them. Shields and lances carried high caught the light of the Moment, and flashed it back into eternity. The sudden guttural shouts, the terrific impact of steel on iron and iron on steel, the perpetual jingling of spur-chains and bridle-chains, every noise of combat that filled the air was of the Moment. "Now, now, NOW!" the whole earth echoed and re-echoed, "NOW is the accepted time, not of salvation but of existence! NOW is the moment for which we were born, for which we were conceived, carried, delivered, for which we took on the form and flesh of manhood!"

Or so it seemed to John. Behind him the Mowbray tent flapped and creaked in occasional gusts of wind. A hundred yards away to the right of him the long-bowmen still held their ground, and the sound of their singing arrows still filled the air. With the heat of the day a dust had risen from the ground, and men and horses were half hidden in a sea of dust, moving, blinding, suffocating. Away to the left of him the vines that had not been trampled down still climbed their poles, though most of their fruit had been removed by the pages the night before. They were still eating the grapes, and young John had a succulent bunch hanging from his belt, but he was too absorbed to eat. So *this* was what war was like! It was even more exciting than the Fair. In a way it reminded him of the Fair, though the Fair had become remoter in his memory with the passage of time. The Fair had not been as vivid

as this. This was life, *real* life. He sat on a stool that he had taken from the tent, and stared into the chaos before him. Occasionally a wounded man was carried across his line of vision, groaning and bleeding. John never saw him. Every fibre of his being stretched out towards life — not death, life, unmutilated, complete and vibrant, fulfilling finally every function for which it was intended.

Where the actual participants perceived and dealt with a fraction of what was going on, John from a distance perceived the whole. He sat there, his chin in his hands, frowning with concentration, his ferocious gaze fixed on some point in the middle distance, unwavering. He would have sat there all day, his lazy body forgotten, squatting on the stool, and his whole mind fighting with the best of them in the mêlée before him. At his side Sir John's spare horses, tethered in a ring to a stake in the ground, shook their heads and stamped their feet in vain efforts to discourage too attentive flies. He never heard them. He never saw Fleance emerge at last, a blurred figure wading knee-deep through dust and fallen bodies, to sharpen into his own lean personality as he approached the tent. His visor was up, and his face shining with sweat. He went behind the tent a moment, emerged a moment later, and taking one of Sir John's horses, had remounted and was riding hell-for-leather back into the dust. It took him again and smothered him in its increasing folds. . . . Still the boy sat motionless, absorbed. His short sword would not be used that day. It did not matter. In his mind's eye he was wielding a two-handed sword, and decapitating Frenchmen in hun-

dreds. It never occurred to him to take active part in the battle. As far as he was concerned he was already in the very thick of it.

Half an hour later Fleance and two foot-soldiers staggered back to the tent with Sir John recumbent between them. John was sent to fetch the armourer, and in the tent a noise of hammers soon began, loosening the wounded man from his chain-mail. The page was put on guard at the tent opening. As the busy men passed in and out, "Who's winning?" he asked. "We're winning, aren't we?" They told him yes, and he seemed to increase two inches in height, standing at the door with his head up and his eyes shining. "Hooray for England!" He wanted to shout it out loud. He wanted to turn somersaults and stand on his head.

Away to the right a thin fallen line of dead marked the place where the long-bowmen had once stood. They had advanced so far now, that they were out of sight.... The battle was still going on.

Chapter IV

Man's Estate

I

After Poictiers there was a temporary cessation of hostilities. A game of chess when one queen has been taken is poor fun, and perhaps the French felt the loss of their king in the same way, for he had been captured by certain Burgundians on the English side during the battle. After some unpleasantness with these gentlemen the Black Prince managed to get him across to England and to exhibit him in a triumphal procession through the city. Two years later the Treaty of Bretigny was signed, and Europe rested for a breathing space.

In his Sussex home Sir John Mowbray recovered from his wounds, and by careful management of his estates replenished his needy purse. For entertainment he went hunting and hawking over the marshy lands, still attended by Fleance and by the male members of his household, including his page. They spent all day out of doors, hallooing and calling the dogs, and came back at night tired out to follow the same sport to-morrow.

When he was called to Westminster Sir John went, but he was not a courtier at heart, and stayed as little time as possible. The King was a man of fickle memory and tastes already expensive, but to stay away when summoned might be twisted into a charge of high treason against one, so laggingly he went. Fleance, like the earl, had no love for London either. His gentle spirit craved a gentle life, divided by the four seasons of the year into sufficient and delightful variation. The noisy intrigues, the challengings and boastings that filled the court reminded him of the drones of the hive around the queen bee, achieving nothing yet perpetually seeking for favours. It nauseated him. The foul air and the smoke clogged his lungs. The gaudy finery, fringed with beggars diseased by sores too hideous for description, offended his every fastidious sense. In such an atmosphere it was a continual effort for him to exist at all, and he longed ardently for the sweet milkmaid breath of the country all the while he was away from it.

Young Johnny had no such longings. London, like Heaven was paved with gold for him. He had been through it only twice in his life before, but already he knew it for the centre of the earth, and *his* centre in the future. (For despite the manhood which he felt had come upon him at Poictiers he was still a creature of impulse and servant to no one but his own unruly will.)

He was not in the least overawed by the court or by the fine gentlemen and ladies he saw there. The King himself, seen from a distance, did not impress him. But he made himself free of the city

in a very short time, swaggering down Fleet Street and Chancery Lane, stealing fruit from Lincoln's Inn gardens, and fighting apprentices at Temple Gate, before returning to the inn where Sir John Mowbray lodged. Sir John had become used to him, as one gets used to a great dog about the house, and even encouraged him to play the fool when there were guests; letting him drink as much as he would, until the wine took the last restraint from his already loose speech, and the ponderous overburdened sentences poured from lips still childlike enough to make them sound ridiculous. Fleance, looking on from a distance, found no entertainment in this bear-baiting. Loose speech and rhodomontade might be well enough after supper, but in a working world they were wearisome. He knew the boy to be an incorrigible liar and flatterer and lazybones, for too often he had to make good himself what John chose to leave undone in delivering messages and running errands. When he complained to the earl, the earl told him he was jealous, and that he was to leave the boy alone. John was a clown, and as a clown he was amusing. One couldn't expect him to be more.

Meanwhile Fleance's own position was in jeopardy. While he had been kept busy running after the page, the post of squire had been filled by the earl's own eldest son, and though he tried hard Fleance never quite regained the old footing of confidence and familiarity. He blamed the boy for this state of affairs and grew even more moody and embittered, loathing every moment of existence in London and pining for the country estates.

And John grew and grew, until at fifteen he topped the squire by a good inch and had a beard as stiff as a boar-hog's bristles that cost him a tussle with the razor at least three times a week. He had made his own friends amongst the other pages and lived a carefree existence, returning periodically to his benefactor for loose change and appreciation of his anecdotes. In or out of town his duties were purely nominal, to everyone else's disappointment. They could not imagine it to be good for a human being to be out enjoying himself all the time, and least of all would it be good for young Falstaff.

But they were mistaken. He did not enjoy himself all the time; for, as his adolescence passed, it left a kind of backwash of depression that engulfed him whenever his defences of self-respect were low. An inferiority complex would force him to go about, as voluble in melancholy as in joy, proclaiming himself mean and unworthy and the lowest of God's creatures. His companions, recognizing these symptoms, made haste to reclaim the articles of clothing, *objets d'art* or sums of money that they had lent to him in haste and repented at leisure. At such time he was usually empty in pocket but copious in assurance and promises. . . . He made wills, too, from time to time, dividing up his personal belongings with an air of gloomy enjoyment. Fleance was usually bequeathed a chamber-pot, "for his love and goodwill to me." Physical pain touched him lightly, but mental depression was so rare a visitor that when it came it cast him into the very depths. Religion would become a vital necessity for three days or so, and the good father who heard his confessions

would be treated to an outpouring of sins that excelled in diabolical variety and ingenuity anything he had ever heard before.

And afterwards John would go home, repeating a paternoster, and stop to join with the crowd in pelting some defaulting tradesman in the pillory with over-ripe fruit and rotten eggs. In doing this he felt that he cleansed his own system of impurities far more effectively than prayers could have done, and it was with a light heart that he left the crowd and followed some coy harlot to her room, to spend the night in voluptuous enjoyment. His cheerful countenance and roving eye made him a favourite with women, and at twenty he was an adept in love-making, though the pleasure he shared with his partners was an animal one, and any love he may have felt was only for himself.

He was also an adept at the other London occupation for idle boys and men, practical joking, and he and his contemporaries filled their days with schemings and plottings and their nights with merriment. In fine weather they took boats and sailed up the Thames, ramming and sinking other boats, and singing the hours away with guitars and zitherns, like gondoliers. At fair or festival-time they gathered in Moorfields, whistling after the servant girls, and fighting, in a sudden drunken frenzy, to see which of them should possess the prettiest. Such company disdained anything but surnames, and young Falstaff and young Walford and young Bois-le-duc swaggered through the town, their arms about each other's shoulders, even while

they devised fresh plans to bring about each other's discomfiture.

But the winters were always spent at Nottingham, and John detested Nottingham. There was nothing there but the goose-fair and the castle, and a certain feminine influence in the house, hostile to the presence of both himself and Fleance. Sir John was growing old and deaf and blind, and with his youngest son upon his knee he forgot the existence of his adopted sons. The earl-appellant had already taken upon himself his father's more strenuous obligations, and it was only while he was fulfilling them, and while Lady Mowbray was otherwise engaged, that the two young men could keep close to their benefactor, hanging on his lightest word. Though he could no longer see them he could feel them, and his trembling hands lingered on the head of the one who had served him faithfully, and the one who had never served him in any true sense of the word, with the impartiality of the very old. "Don't be afraid, my dears," he said. "I will not forget you. I will remember your love and loyalty. I will provide for you, in my will. It would be a strange thing if I could not reward my squire and my page."

And at such times he told them what they should have: because John was a town-lover he should have an annuity sufficient to keep him in London and to become a student at one of the Inns of Court, and the old man would chuckle, "Idle fellow! Idle fellow! Do you not know that young men must not waste their time?" The only stipulation was that if the French War were to begin again he must drop his book learning and join the Prince's

standard — a commandment readily agreed to.

And Fleance, because he loved the country, was to be given a little estate in Gloucester, part of a fief recently divided up. There he should live and marry and get sons, and end his days in peace. "Well, my courtier turned hermit," the old man said. "Will that suit you?" But a smile curled the corners of his mouth. He could not help despising such a vegetating life himself, and would have promised the young man no chance of indulging it had it not been for his delicate physique. Then his fit of coughing would start again, and the women would come in, and Fleance and John would wander out disconsolately — Fleance to return to his room, sitting on his bed, dreaming perilous dreams of the precious acres awaiting him in Gloucestershire, and John to play football aimlessly about the passages. Sometimes he came upon young Thomas, the Earl's second son, and they had a game together. Thomas was still in petticoats but he played football with surprising verve and for a moment cured John's homesickness for London. There was no serious obstacle to his leaving for the town that very day, except that it might spoil his chances of a legacy, and a compassion of sorts kept him ready to play the buffoon to the old man, though he was itching to be up and away. The town meant *people,* living, breathing people, and people were the essence of life to him. He had no intention of becoming a student at any Inn of Court, but he would take the legacy and live on the income that the Lombardy merchants gave him for the loan of it. Apart from that settled point his future stretched before him in

a delicious haze. Once in London things would happen from day to day, as they had a way of doing there, and he would be in the midst of them. . . .

And the winter of '63 dragged slowly on, and the Earl still lived, though his pulse beat more slowly every day, and no shouted words could any longer penetrate through his ears to his brain. Fleance grew haggard with the strain of waiting, and lines of disappointment dug themselves into his thin handsome face. There was so little for him to do, except to wait. John spent his days out on the frosty roads with the dogs, dreaming of the frozen Thames and of the festivities of Christmas. If only the old man would die, and get on with it! Life of any sort was worth encountering, but this death-in-life grew wearisome. He beat his hands together for warmth and called the dogs before starting again half-heartedly for home. . . .

And in the spring Sir John Mowbray died, and a new Sir John Mowbray took his place. And John Falstaff discovered that the fees for his studentship were already paid at Clement's Inn and that the money for keeping him *would* keep him, but do nothing more.

As for Fleance, Sir John's land in Gloucestershire had been bequeathed to the Abbot Gloucester, to enlarge his already huge estates.

2

JOHN WYCLIFFE has been described as the morning star of the Reformation, and in a heaven crammed with stars it is small wonder that his should only

glimmer palely amongst the transient spangle of his companions. John of Gaunt, "the greatest subject in England," was a shooting star, brief and brilliant, which illumined on its way the smaller but perpetual star of Wycliffe.

Of John Wycliffe himself we know little. Even the place of his birth is problematical. But John of Gaunt's antecedents and descendants have a family tree almost as illustrious as the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Princely blood ran in their veins. (It ran in the veins of most county families, but perhaps not so continuously as in the house of Lancaster, which by marrying John of Gaunt to its eldest surviving daughter, drew in a fresh supply of princely blood.) John of Gaunt was the fourth son of the King. Wycliffe was the son of nobody in particular. John of Gaunt was a warrior and a statesman. Wycliffe was a doctor of theology, and the master of Balliol College. John of Gaunt owned thirty castles, and the enormous wealth resulting therefrom. He also owned the Palace of the Savoy, a magnificent building that stretched from the Strand down to the river's edge. John Wycliffe had the rectory of the parish of Lutterworth, in Leicestershire. John of Gaunt's was a life of action. Wycliffe's was a life withdrawn and secret. It was almost as if he had set out to prove that a man could live in those spectacular times, and influence them, without doing anything particularly spectacular himself. Even when the stage was set for him, and his cue came, it was always a crowd scene that drew the attention of the crowd, and whether he played the part of villain or hero he played it

always too inconspicuously to draw either cheering or booing. He was a man weak in bodily strength, but strong in spirit, with an occasional edge to his tongue that rasped the Church, now grown sensitive and suspicious. In the privy intricacies of his mind — a maze into which no one has entered since without losing himself completely — he collected information and came to slow conclusions, announcing them to the world at large with a deliberation that nothing could disguise; for he lacked the adaptability of a courtier and the meekness of a clerk in holy orders, and went his own way, exasperating his champions almost as much as he did his enemies. Beginning as a faithful son of the Church he ended as one of the fathers of it, by translating the Bible into English and by forming a body of simple priests, bidding them go through all the world and preach the gospel to every creature.

And Wycliffe's gospel was a fiery one, including a complete denunciation of the Church and its ways, described in the homely and direct speech of the common people, just as he had put the Bible into homely and direct speech. At different times he had different champions: John of Gaunt, politically against the Church, took him up with great fervour — and dropped him again. Parliament employed him, and forgot him. The King himself used him as an embassy to Bruges, to dispute the Pope's power, and would have destroyed him later, if the Pope had ordered it. His own University was a house divided against itself. It was all very well for Wycliffe to stand there and say there was no such thing as heresy or excommunication when the Pope

could and probably would threaten them with those very things.

And Wycliffe went on working, careless of champions or enemies. He wrote Latin treatises explaining his theories, and lectured about them when he was allowed to, though he never neglected his pastorship. And when he died at Lutterworth, he slipped out of the world almost as quietly as he had come into it, and missed the final triumph that martyrdom would have given him. He would not have minded, either way. Before his body had been burnt to ashes he would have been arguing with St. Peter in the courts of heaven about that vexed question of transubstantiation. Because of his translation of the Vulgate he is called the Father of English prose.

John of Gaunt was the father of Henry the Fourth.

3

THE first thing that young Falstaff did on arriving in London was to look up his friends Walford and Bois-le-duc. Walford, he discovered, was in Italy, but Bois-le-duc was as available and amenable to suggestion as ever. Indeed, before the young man knew where he was he had been bullied into becoming a co-student at Clement's Inn. They paid it a visit before the term opened and found it to be a homely-looking place, with a good garden and a chapel and every modern convenience. The bedrooms were large and lofty, running like corridors, the full length of the building. Underneath was the library and the great dining-hall. Deserted, it held

a dignity it never could have supported once term began, but just then it filled the two young men with trepidation, and they conversed in whispers. That is to say, Bois-le-duc did the conversing, and Falstaff kept obstinately silent while his eyes rolled surprisingly. He was still annoyed because the money had not been given direct to him, in which case all this foolishness would have been avoided. The place was like a school. He didn't want to go to school again. He'd had enough of that at Selby Abbey. . . .

That night he got very drunk, but not before ensuring that his companion was drunk as well. They might as well have their fling before term started. . . . He helped Bois-le-duc home, and then Bois-le-duc helped him home, and after that they spent the greater part of the night bidding each other fond farewells. It was not nice behaviour for someone recently bereaved, and once Bois-le-duc sought to restrain him by a hiccuped injunction, but as this resulted in Falstaff dropping upon his knees in Fleet Street and praying loudly for the repose of the good earl's soul, it was not repeated. Cockcrow found them still wandering wearily about, looking for their lodging-places.

Soon after that, term started. At Clement's Inn the students strolled in pairs, and stood clustered in small groups, telling smutty stories or talking scandal. The newly-enrolled members were distinguishable from the rest by their air of diligent preoccupation as they lolled in the Inn yards, their backs, suitably enough, to the wall. Nobody spoke to them except their own forlorn contemporaries, but by the many glances and whisperings going on

amongst the others it was obvious that some unpleasant scheme of initiation was afoot. Pieces of rope were being handed about, and a bag of soot stood at one side. The new members coughed nervously, and edged away, gripping the hilts of their swords for consolation. They would sell their dignity dearly, or not at all.

In the gardens Bois-le-duc was showing John Falstaff the wonderful orchard. They were neither of them very interested in nursery-gardening, but one had to do something until the class started, and it was well to be as far away from the yard as possible.

"Yes," said young Bois-le-duc in reply to a query which had never been asked. "Yes, these are quite the finest nut-trees I have ever seen. Why, one could get a bushel off that tree alone. Look out, don't look behind you, I can see something moving in the shrubbery. They're probably coming upon us to surprise us.... Yes, quite distinctly I can see something moving." He edged a little nearer to his companion. John had taken a handful of mulberries from an overhanging branch, and was munching them, apparently quite well-at-ease. If any apprehension filled his heart, it was not visible.

"Listen," went on Bois-le-duc. "I'm a friend of yours, Falstaff, or I wouldn't tell you this. My cousin, who has just left here tells me that if we shout the password when they arrive, they'll take us for students from some other college, and we shall get out of it."

"Out of what?" said Falstaff, obtusely.

"Out of the ragging, my dear fellow. They won't chew us to pieces quite so much."

"Nobody is going to chew *me* to pieces," said Falstaff.

"Nonsense — what are we against so many? We'll probably come in for some of it, but if we shout the password first it won't be so bad."

"What *are* you talking about?" said Falstaff. He was choosing not to understand. His friend became desperate.

"It doesn't matter, fathead! Just do as I tell you. When they come up to us we've got to turn and shout: 'Hem, Boys!' D'you see? Just like that, only louder, sort of clearing your throat."

"Whose throat?"

"Ah, you dam' fool! It's waste of time being kind to you. Just remember now, 'Hem, Boys!' That's the word."

Bois-le-duc would have followed this up with more advice, but was prevented by the enemy. Dangerously casual, six or seven students had emerged from their hiding-place and were sauntering down the path, towards their prey. Their hands were hidden behind their backs. On either side of him and his companion, Falstaff was hemmed in by thornbushes. Ahead of him the brick path ended abruptly at a pool's edge. Really, he and Bois-le-duc could not have selected a more unhappy place. At that moment he cursed his bulk, and would willingly have changed places with Bois-le-duc. On such occasions where there is least flesh there is likely to be least indignity. The students were closing in upon them, moving with a terrible unanimity of step. It was

worse than meeting the whole French army put together. He must think quickly, or go home to his lodging disgraced.... Bois-le-duc was plucking at his sleeve.

"Whatever they do, don't draw your sword!" he whispered miserably. "They won't forgive that, my cousin tells me. They think it's unsportsmanlike."

"Shall I be butchered," said Falstaff rather too loudly, "to make a Roman holiday?" He half turned on his pursuers. Yes, they were all lads, mere lads. He was damned if he'd be mauled by children hardly out of pinafores! And the one at the end of the row was young Shallow, the son of the man in Gloucester who had lent so much money to the King — a tradesman's son. Inspiration flashed upon him. In full view of the oncoming throng, he turned upon his companion and, seizing him by the shoulders, shook him like a rat and threw him to the ground. There he kicked him as he lay.

"Dirt!" he shouted. "Garbage! Draw your sword on me, would you? Don't you know we don't put up with that sort of thing, here?" Then, as if suddenly aware of the others, he looked round at them, and waved his hand. "Hem, Boys!" he called. "You're just in time! Bring on your ropes, young Shallow. I've got a froggie here, all young and innocent. Let's feed him to the fishes!"

4

WITH his new occupation, our hero found his life still more attractive. All work and no play might

have made Jack Falstaff a dull boy, but there was little likelihood of any dullness at Clement's Inn. The lessons in bolts and moots were oral, and the classes large enough for preoccupation to go unnoticed. They were also attractively interspersed with feastings and dancings and wrestlings, and all the other occupations which fitted a young man with a legal mind for a place at court.

Since their first memorable encounter with the students Falstaff had shaken Bois-le-duc from him as if he were some repellent insect, and by virtue of knowing Robin Shallow moved in far grander circles. The benchers might have objected to him on a score of counts — because it was his first term, because he was badly off, because he was bastard, but they didn't. Instead, because of his conquering-hero manner and his elaborate vocabulary of blasphemy and abuse, they took him to their hearts without further ado. All of which goes to show how the wicked flourish. He thoroughly enjoyed himself. The minimum of Latin which had been driven into him at Selby now stood him in good stead, and his ready brain soon learned to roll out a few round phrases suitable for different occasions. Of law he learned nothing and cared less. He would not make it *his* business to fulfil an old man's whim. But of court fashions and foibles, of the correct way to make a leg, to draw a sword, to fondle a harlot, to steal a purse, to put the spurs on a gamecock, to bully the ignorant, to flatter the weak and to confound the crafty, no one was more immediately aware. And if he took no trouble to learn the letter of the law at Clement's Inn, the spirit was bit by bit instilled into

him, so that ever afterwards his mind moved within legal limits, until he was able with practice to explain away his most unconscionable action to his own satisfaction. And sometimes to everybody else's.

Out of term he lived upon his friends so that he might have the more money for lavish entertainment. And when his friends had had enough of him, and even Bois-le-duc had rebelled, he lodged outside of the city itself in the Benedictine priory of St. Bartholomew. This was an excellent starting-point for his excursions, as it lay just beyond Aldgate, and every morning as he reached the stout remains of the wall which still enclosed Roman London he sniffed the tainted atmosphere with new delight. Although he had lived there for over a year it was still a pleasure to him to rise early and walk towards the still-sleeping city. If it had rained during the night the garbage that filled the gutters would have been washed away towards the sloping green banks of Wall Brook or Hole Bourne or Lang Bourne, draining from them into the Thames. A few chimneys sent drowsy ribbons of smoke up into the still air, and the spires of the churches caught the light like steel-tipped lances. Only the good brothers in the monasteries were astir, for their aubade was even earlier than birdsong. A few farmers' carts jolting over the cobbles carried the market produce into the city, and herds of cows were driven for milking outwards from the meadows where they had been browsing during the night.

As he left the suburbs and reached the very core of the congestion, so John Falstaff reached the full core of his delight. This was *his* home, *his* in-

heritance. Here a man might live all his life, and want nothing better. Here a man might die contented.

Indeed, if he had had the wherewithal to live there, he might have built himself a house in London, and kept good company, never caring to stir outside the city walls again. Or so he thought at twenty-five. A soldier's life did not appeal to him in practice as much as in theory, in spite of his appreciation of Poictiers. Fleance had been a soldier, and it had led him nowhere. Money was what he really wanted. It would be nice to have an enormous sum of money, never never again to have to put up with the peevishness of those who had lent, the disappointment of those who tried to borrow. Money exasperated Falstaff. He did nothing to it, yet it disappeared. If he had had enough money, he wouldn't have wasted his time at Clement's Inn; he would just have lived gloriously, taking his ease in his inn, completely idle, yet completely occupied.

And money, or the lack of money, just now proved no exception to the rule, for the brothers at St. Bartholomew's were growing a little restive under the visitor's prolonged stay. He had told them nothing of his studentship, only that he was about to start on a pilgrimage to the tomb of St. James of Compostella, but that he was waiting for a sign to come to him before beginning his journey. Apparently the sign was withheld, for the visitor stayed on and on, taking plenty of material nourishment but none of spiritual. He chose his own time, too, swaggering in and out of the priory at all hours of the day and night.

Hints proved worse than useless, and it was not until the brothers pleaded lack of room that Falstaff one day left and did not return. He had discovered a complaisant hostess at the Boar's Head, the inn where he and the Abbot had put up for the night so many years ago. It had changed hands, and now belonged to a couple of the name of Quickly. He had not seen the host, but he liked the look of the hostess, for she was young and comely, with a pair of shining black eyes that would have put the come-hither over a hermit, and which more than made up for her bad breath and relic-teeth. He lived there like a king for some weeks, entertaining his friends at their own expense, and discussing with them the latest gossip from the court.

And one night, when as usual they had drunk more than they could conveniently hold, his companions left, solemnly tobogganing down the staircase and staggering up the street, waking all Billingsgate with extempore song. Then Hostess Quickly slipped into the room and blew out the candles. The moonlight poured upon her lodger, snoring with his head on the table, and his mouth wide open. She put her head on one side, and looked at him like a bright pert little bird. She loved the man. Her husband was elderly and suffered from asthma, and she could hear him even now, wheezing and coughing in the room above her. When she had married him and come to London it was not just to scold the servants or to lie awake at night hearing *him* hawk and spit. And it was not to hear him complain about the bill Mr. Falstaff was running up either. Goodness knows she got more satisfaction

from Mr. Falstaff than from all the other lodgers put together. Besides, he was expecting that money from the court, all the time. They would pay him before the end of the month, he had said, and he had promised to take her to the next fair, and treat her to every show she cared to name. She sighed blissfully, thinking of it, for she was still in her teens, and London was still new to her; then she moved forward to the table. Mr. Falstaff was heavy but she had not been country-born and bred for nothing.

"Come to bed, sir," she said caressingly — it was curious how the drink always took gentlemen in the knees. "Mind your head, sir, against the doorway. Oh, come to bed!"

5

But husbands who are extraordinarily blind to affairs going on under their own roof are sharp enough in money matters. Mr. Falstaff must pay up or go. He had heard that story about the court before. If Mr. Falstaff had influence at the court why did he come and lodge in Eastcheap? If Mr. Falstaff wasn't careful he would find that living so close to the Tower had perils as well as advantages! And more heavy pleasantry to the same effect. It would have embarrassed most young men, but nothing embarrassed Mr. Falstaff. It bored him, all this insistence on money, money, money, when it was obvious enough that he hadn't the remotest idea where money was to be found!

"Your husband is a leech," he told his hostess.

She did not answer, but put up her mouth to be

kissed. She had a basket under her arm, and wore a mulberry-coloured gown.

"Are you going out?" he asked.

"Yes, sir, shopping."

"Then I will come too." He took her arm and hustled her down the street. From an upper window, Quickly heard the clatter of her little wooden clogs on the cobbles, and looked out. Mr. Falstaff had taken a shilling from his pocket and was throwing it up into the air and catching it again with a great appearance of ease, and Mrs. Quickly was smiling up at him, her face like the pink heart of a rose set in the white petals of her wimple. Quickly began to call. "Hi!——" He began, but a fit of coughing took him, and as soon as he had breath enough he cursed loudly and frequently. He would show that young wife of his who wore the breeches! Mr. Falstaff should leave the Boar's Head that very day....

When the purchases were completed and the haggling done Mr. Falstaff and his hostess went down together and sat on the mudbanks below London Bridge. The tide was out, and the refuse thrown from the windows of the houses on the bridge drifted aimlessly between the twenty arches, too light to sink, too heavy to float away.... On the south side of the river the cows stood knee-deep in the water, and St. Mary Overy's windmill sails turned fitfully in the summer breeze. He took her hand in his. It was a rough little hand, from scouring and scrubbing. She was eating an apple, with cheeks as red as her own, with the other, and spitting the pips with thoughtful precision down towards the river. He had no desire to break this pleasant

silence, just staring ahead of him, watching the summer scene, the strange ships that went up and down the river. It was Nell Quickly who broke the spell.

"I don't believe you have friends at court at all, Mr. Falstaff," she said. He smiled. She had spoken with great defiance, pouting her rosy lips, and tossing her chin. And she was wriggling her toes in her soft shoes, as if the strap of the patterns irked them. That was childish, too.... He continued to smile at her. He was really as fond of this pleasant little thing as of anybody. But when she repeated her remark, his mood changed. Toleration didn't get a man anywhere.

"Hold your tongue, woman!" he said. "I mayn't have friends there yet, but I will some day. You'll see if I don't!"

"And I'll get paid some day too, I suppose?" she said pertly.

"Yes, you will, and that'll be a surprise for you, won't it? I shall march up to the Boar's Head, in velvet and satin, and I shall pay your old man a hundred pounds.... And then I shall tell the King to imprison him, and you and I will live on the money as long as it lasts."

"Oh, you'll know the King too, will you?"

"Of course I shall. Like the back of my hand."

"Oh, if you do *that,*" she said, "you'll have forgotten all about me."

"No I shan't, sweetheart." He took both her hands. "Really I won't. Why, when I'm not away on important expeditions I shall come and live at the Boar's Head, yes, and I'll see that you get the very best company there, too. Crowned heads and all."

"You're joking," she said, but she giggled and wriggled her shoulders under her wimple, then put her head confidingly on his shoulder. Her missing front teeth and white wimple made her look like a roguish baby. Only the slightest anxiety still remained. Mr. Falstaff would pay her as soon as he was able, she was sure of that, and then her husband would stop nagging and life would be peaceful again. It was idyllic, being there with Mr. Falstaff, on the river bank. At least, it would have been idyllic if the soft surface of mud on which they had been sitting had not crept up round them. The sun had gone in, and the tide had turned. It was very cold. It was really rather silly to sit there like lovers, when it was so cold and damp. Mrs. Quickly rose stiffly to her feet, and seizing his hands she succeeded after some breathless moments in which the tug-of-war might have gone either way, in pulling Falstaff up too. They brushed the mud from their nether quarters and set off home. On the way she pestered him with more questions, about his past life, his relations.

"Why don't you go home to Falwell?" she said.

"That's none of your business!"

"No, keeping an inn's my business, and seeing that I get paid for board and lodging!"

Falstaff was angry at this. He began to walk so fast that Nell Quickly had to run to keep pace with him. As she was also burdened with a heavy basket she soon grew too out of breath to go on talking. In any case he would not have listened. The term was not due to start for another month, no one else in town was prepared to board him, and the

idea of going to Falwell for that time had already occurred to him, but now that she had suggested it he could not possibly consider the proposal. It was really very tiresome of her. He swung round Bread Street and went marching down it, frowning ahead of him, with his head held very high and his hands gripping his leather belt. He went so fast that Mrs. Quickly was soon left far behind, and by the time she arrived home at the Boar's Head he had flung himself down on a bench and was reading a letter that had arrived by special messenger. She stopped on the threshold and stood looking at him.... A black cat that had been sleeping on the window-ledge stretched herself, yawned once and jumped gracefully to the floor, going to her mistress and rubbing ingratiatingly against her skirts.

After a while Falstaff dropped the sheet of paper and smiled at her across it, like the rising sun. Then, "Come here," he said.

She came slowly, putting the basket on the table. When she was within reach he seized her and pulled her on to his knees.

"Read this," he commanded.

"I have never learnt to read, Mr. Falstaff."

"Then I'll read it for you." He held her round the waist with one arm and flourished the letter with the other.

" 'Dear John,' " he read, " 'Robin Shallow of Gloucester gave us your address so we hasten to write and tell you that our mother, who has been bedridden for some time, is now dying. The doctors say she will not live the week through. If this

reaches you we hope you will come home to see her for the last time. She has been asking for you.— William.' "

"Oh — who's William?" she said.

"William, my dear, is my half-wit half-brother."

"And will you go?"

"Of course. I'm going to-morrow." He was suddenly very determined. "It's the least I can do. No —" he put his hand over her mouth —"you are not to ask me about the bill. You know perfectly well I've nothing to pay the bill with. Perhaps I shall get some money out of William. Tell your old man that, anyway. D'you think he would lend me a horse?"

"You shall *have* a horse," she said without entering into explanation.

"Good — and to-night, as it's my last night, let's have a bumper supper. Duck and apple sauce — can you get a duck?"

"You shall have a duck," she said.

"Good. And the wine. Really, you know the wine has been appalling lately. Bois-le-duc tells me he was sick all night from it. If you get something different — something a little more distinguished ——"

"You shall have the wine," she said; then suddenly she looked at him searchingly, then flung her arms about his neck.

"Oh, Mr. Falstaff! Mr. Falstaff!" she cried. "If I never see you again I shall be a broken-hearted woman indeed!"

6

No fatted calves were killed when the prodigal son returned. Lady Falstaff had died three days previously, and now lay motionless as the stone replica of herself that had been carved beside that of her husband. William and Geoffrey Falstaff made room for him grudgingly. He had come too late to serve the one purpose they desired him for, and they wished he would go away again. John had no intention of going, at least until after the funeral. The weather was fine and bright and he rode about the estate on Mr. Quickly's horse, waving his hand to the tenants like some benign Cæsar surveying conquered land. As no money was forthcoming from his brothers, he saw no use in returning to London — much as he would have liked to — until term began again at Clement's Inn. He felt elderly and important and out-of-debt down at Falwell. The place had not changed, in all the years he had been absent from it. Only the people had changed. The mother was dead and the children were all grown up. One of the twin girls had married, and now lived on the Welsh border, and one had entered a sisterhood in Gloucester. Geoffrey had taken over the estate management from the bailiff, and William was training to be a soldier. He had already taken part in one or two tournaments, and intended to join the Black Prince's army when it returned to France. The truce could not last for ever, he assured his relatives importantly.

John was puzzled at this new martial spirit in

William. Secretly he despised the boy for his slender physique and quiet ways, but he had learned to dissemble and now merely asked questions where before he would have jeered and gibed.

"I am going to try for a knighthood. My father would have wished it," said William, still grudgingly. Really, it was no affair of John's. But when John offered no criticism he grew curious. What was fighting really like? Had John killed anybody while he was in France? What was the Prince of Wales like, and how much would it cost to transfer a fighting force over the water?

John answered fully and inaccurately. Still, William was not to know that. He was filled with vague ideas of crusades and chivalry, and of carrying out his father's wishes. A trembling ambition had seized upon him, and he wore himself out with rehearsals of warfare and with carrying a suit of armour too heavy for his slight body, to be prepared for any emergency.

As for John, he was dubious of the war reopening again, and not very keen to participate in it, if it did, though Falwell irked him as the Mowbray place in Nottingham had done. He was tired of it before he had been back a week. If he sat lazing, as he loved to do, depression would steal over him, and snatch away the pleasure of leisure hours; so as often as possible he was out of doors, visiting the farmers on the estate, and making ardent love to their wives and daughters. Yet, even in the warmest embrace, returning the most enticing kiss, he remembered Nell Quickly, and longed for her, not

because she was Nell Quickly, but because she lived in London, and London was his mistress more than any flesh and blood could ever be. Besides, he desired companionship, and there was no companionship in the country. He missed his friends at Clement's Inn. He missed being called "That rake, young Falstaff." Here at Falwell it was "John, John, John" like any farmer's boy. It made him want to wear straw in his hair and touch his forelock in derisive imitation....

But no mood swayed him for long. He changed like a weather-cock with every wind, and enjoyed himself enormously, especially after recovering from a fit of melancholy. He was still young and strong and healthy, bursting with vitality, and ready to bend the whole world to his will — if he could have concentrated long enough on doing it. Overemphasis was necessary to his existence. He could not cross a courtyard without striding forward and swinging his arms as if he meant to talk to Canterbury. He could not eat a meal unless he gobbled it as if every minute were precious and such trivial occupation kept him from more urgent and important work. Everything was exaggerated, pretentious and grotesque, because his whole character enclosed this trinity, and he could no more have reduced his behaviour to the more sober level of ordinary existence than he could have changed his skin like a snake's. Conscious to the fullest extent of his own ego, he was only semi-conscious of everyone else's, and moved in a world of his own, peopled by his own boastful boisterous imagination....

Before he could return to Clement's Inn, the fiction of war had become a fact, and the Black Prince had sailed again for France. All England was throbbing to the sound of drums and the hurrying note of trumpets, and quite suddenly the Inns of Court lost all attraction for Falstaff, and he knew he must go to the war again. The memory of Poictiers sprang up like a phœnix. Somehow, in some way, he must go and join the Prince. He told his half-brothers so. He demanded a suit of armour from them, but Geoffrey had charge of the money-bags and suits of armour were expensive things. "You should have captured a French knight and stripped *him,* if you wanted one," said the brothers.

But they gave him a breastplate and a helmet, and told him he should go to the wars as William's squire. For this service he would be paid at the handsome rate of one shilling per day, and if he were careful, he might eventually save up enough from that to live on in his old age. Though of course they would always be glad to see him at Falwell, for they were kindly souls and had no desire to escape any family obligations — and they regarded their bastard brother as a very heavy obligation. But they were also industrious and prudent by nature, and wished to instil these virtues by hook or crook into him. They were even hopeful of doing so, for when the duties of a squire devolved upon John he took them without argument, and his brothers, struck dumb in amazement, never knew that in his own mind he was about far more important things. Being the heavier of the two he took

the best horse, and from that imposing height bid farewell to Geoffrey.

"Don't you worry," he said, "I'll take care of young William."

But when he was once more on the road to London his high spirits got the better of him, and he grew domineering and offensive in his manner towards his relation, amusing the passers-by with loud and unattractive comparisons as he rode behind the embarrassed William, who, at last goaded beyond endurance, turned on him.

"You be quiet!" he said, his voice quivering with indignation. "Who's paying for all this, anyway?"

"*You* are, camarado!"

"Well, then, hold your tongue, or I'll send you home again. You're a bad example to the men. How can they have any respect for me, when they see how little *you* have? It costs less to keep you at home than to have you here, wanting the best of everything, jeering and gibing . . ."

But William was mistaken. Although absent from Falwell, John had left some very present reminders behind him, and was costing the estate something in maintenance fees. Before he and the would-be knight had been long in France, three babies had been born, and three farmers had applied to Geoffrey Falstaff for monetary assistance in supporting his bastard brother's offspring. And it was no good denying the facts. No one else could have engendered those dandelion heads of hair, those fiery pale-blue eyes, those lungs of leather. . . . They were christened John, Joanna, and John again.

7

Gossip for once was true when she speculated about the Prince of Wales. He was so ill when he marched his army towards Limoges — the traitor-city that had admitted a French garrison — that he had to be carried in a litter, a rough farm cart drawn by six horses. He lay for the most part with his eyes closed, and lines of suffering cut into his face from nose to mouth, repeating the drooping line of his grey moustaches. Ahead of him his squire on horseback carried his standard of the Rising Sun, and behind him rode the knights and barons of his retinue. He was still middle-aged in actual years, but his over-active life had aged him prematurely, and the shining gilt armour enclosed a body already worn and weary. Only his head was uncovered, resting against a cushion as blue as the sky above him. . . . It seemed to him that he would never stop travelling, as long as he lived — that he had spent his life passing from fief to fief on this side of the Channel, winning fresh ground and regaining old. He wondered whether, when he was no longer there to prevent it, the ever-encroaching Gallic flood would sweep again over the lands so hardly won, though he dared not consider the possibility of losing the coastal towns.

The jerking of the litter as the cart moved over the uneven road often wracked his body as he travelled, waking those surly pains that waited within him like dragons in their fastnesses, to emerge at secret times and gnaw his life away. He had worked so hard, and there seemed to be such

little result for it all. The Spanish campaign had been only a temporary success, and now here was Limoges, as soon as his back was turned, going French again. The rumour of his ill-health must have reached them, and counting on his inability and inaccessibility that rascally bishop had thrown the gates open to the enemy. Well, he would show them — however much it hurt him — that the *sobriquet* Black Prince was well-deserved! No quarter, that was what it would be, in the good old way, none of the modern mercy, this catch-as-catch-can ransoming, but a massacre! He would hurt them as these devils inside him were hurting him. God, but he was tired!

The dazzle of the sun through the awning hurt his eyes, even though he kept them closed, and the eternal rhythm of marching feet beat through his brain relentlessly. He was worn out both mentally and physically. His armour irked him no more than his own body irked him, for he had lived in it so long, but he would have liked to have cast both armour and flesh and blood aside, to emerge, his spirit dazzling like a mayfly, from the clumsy chrysalis that enclosed it.... Rest.... That was what he would get when he was dead — until the Last Judgment at least. He hoped that the Last Judgment was still far distant, for it would mean more activity, more concentration on the affair in hand. He felt he could never really concentrate again, on anything.... This eternal French sky overhead, this eternal French soil underfoot! He tossed his head restlessly on his pillow. While the litter horses were being changed, the whole army halted.

Far away down the line behind him he knew that the foot-soldiers would be flinging themselves and their accoutrements wearily down on the grass at either side of the road. He had seen them do it all his life, whenever a pause gave them opportunity. And once down, they were very difficult to get on their feet again. Well, it was a hot day. His own fingers, when he rubbed them together, crackled like firewood just ignited. That was fever, the doctor said. He opened his hands again, stretching all his fingers down into the cool depths of the jointed gilt gloves. It was like lying on a hot beach, and pushing one's hands, in pure idleness, down, down, down into the sandy depths. It grew so cold down there . . . as cold as it must be at the bottom of the sea. He had lost a shipload of soldiers once, blown away to the Cornish coast and wrecked on its rocks. Their bodies would be lying uneasily at rest down there, stirring with every turn of the tide. . . . How did the hymn go?

"The trumpet by the angel blown
Shall wake the dead, bring bone to bone,
And summon all before the throne."

Yes, but that was just what he didn't want. He didn't want to be summoned before anybody's throne. It always meant more expeditions, more voyages, more expense. And he didn't want to hear trumpets either. He'd heard enough trumpets to last him all his life — and all eternity. But perhaps there was no eternity. Perhaps the priests were wrong, and one just died, deliciously, finally, for

ever and ever. No resurrection. Nothing. Perhaps that was God's will, after all. Except that then, he would miss the reward. Surely there was a reward waiting for him somewhere. He hadn't worked himself to death like this, for nothing at all. He would never be king, now. His son would be king, unless his brother of Gaunt took the crown by force. That was just the trouble. Never any peace, always strife and argument and orders and counter-orders.... Never any peace.... He longed for peace.

When fresh horses had been harnessed to the litter, and the procession had re-started, he continued to think longingly of peace, with his eyes shut, until the shouting of his men told him that Limoges lay visibly ahead. He raised himself on his elbow, then, and stared in the direction of the guilty city. Peace? — No, fire and blood and slaughter! *That* would teach them!

8

DURING the month that the Prince of Wales laid siege to Limoges many fresh combatants arrived, amongst them the brothers Falstaff and their men-at-arms. They raised a tent on the outskirts of the Prince's own army, and drilled from day to day, seeking to make up in rehearsal what they had missed in practice. That is to say, the would-be knight and the soldiers drilled, but the squire had found several former acquaintances in the army and spent his time carousing with them. The Prince of Wales kept to his tent, and held long consultations with his brothers, while he waited for the miners to undermine

the walls of the city. It was only a matter of days now, when the town should fall, and the sun did not go down upon his wrath, but rather shone upon it day by day, feeding it with his own fires.... The breach in the city walls was timed for the early morning, when the townsfolk would be still asleep, and at the same time the gates would be attacked, so that the English army had a double entry. Until then there was little to occupy the men encamped about the town, and they strolled together in couples between the tents, discussing previous campaigns, and shading their eyes to try to recognize the knights they could see appearing on Limoges battlements from time to time. The braver souls risked arrows and Greek fire, and went near enough to the walls to hold conversation with the besieged. Dreadful threats were exchanged, and insulting references were made to Bertrand du Guesclin and the Black Prince. When time passes so slowly something must be done to keep one's anger alive. Only the Black Prince, alone and brooding in his tent, himself besieged by hideous armaments of pain, needed no outward activities to keep his wrath alive. First, Limoges must be disciplined, and then he would discipline his own rebellious body. His work should not go for nothing. He would live and conquer and be king after all, in spite of what the doctors said....

Limoges fell at the appointed time, and block on block of masonry crumbled, collapsing into the nearly-empty moat. At the same moment encouraging cries were raised in the English camp, and the knights dug spurs into their horses and made for the

breach. Others, as instructed, galloped towards the town gates, followed by their men-at-arms, who with battering-rams and axes would destroy them. The whole morning was suddenly, noisily, fatally awake.

Amongst the very first to begin the gallop towards the gate was young William Falstaff. He had sat up all night in his armour, waiting for this moment, and he meant to be the first to enter the city. His squire, who should have been at his side, was nowhere to be seen, but William had no time to bother about that. He felt exhilarated, proud, triumphant. To-night, after many deeds of blood and bravery, he would kneel on the field of battle, and receive the honour of knighthood. His lance was held at the correct angle in his rest. His sword hung loose in his scabbard. For the occasion he had taken his squire's horse, who, pleasantly surprised at the change of weight on his back, went thundering forward, head well down, as if by sheer force of their impact against the gates he and his rider should effect an entrance.

William had pulled his visor down on beginning the gallop, and, unaccustomed to the few peepholes at the outside world which it afforded him, was beginning to wonder whether he had not taken the wrong direction altogether. It was very hot inside the helmet, and sweat was beginning to pour down his forehead, and into his eyes, until the blurred ramparts before him became even more blurred. Doubt changed to certainty. He must be going in the wrong direction. His own horse made so much noise that he was unable to hear the sound of other hoofs behind him, and having got in at the

start there was no one ahead of him. Suppose he were just galloping off into space. How foolish he must look! How the other fellows must be laughing at him! If only he could see clearly, just for a minute, just to find out his bearing. . . .

William Falstaff dropped the reins, raised his iron-gloved hand, and at last succeeded in pushing the visor up. He had guessed rightly. He must have reached the gate some time before, and his horse had turned of its own accord, and was trotting gently round the ramparts. He wiped the sweat from his forehead as best he could, and stared up at the battlements. For a moment he was conscious of a crouching line of archers, outlined against the sky, their steel-tipped arrows glinting in the early sunlight. And the archers were conscious a moment, too, of that pink vulnerable spot suddenly vouchsafed them in the midst of so much invulnerability. They took aim.

William Falstaff got an arrow in the throat. The rest glanced harmlessly off his breastplate and helmet. He leant back a moment, steadying himself on his horse's crupper, then he rolled clumsily off and down into the stagnant waters of the moat. The waters closed over him, and a bulrush, shaken like a lance by his sudden arrival, quivered, and stood still. . . . The horse, a tradesman's horse at heart, went trotting uncertainly back towards the camp, and on its way met the Falstaff men-at-arms, still running for the gate. Being recognized by its saddle and accoutrements, and guessing the tragic news, one of the men turned back, and brought the horse to the squire.

The squire had just finished bandaging his head. He had woken too late to join in the charge with William, and had tried to find him later among the mounted men. And a rider, turning his horse suddenly, had torn a jagged rent across his forehead with a spur. On the table stood a bottle of wine, for restorative purposes. It had been freely applied already.

"Poor William," said the squire, shaking his head. "Poor, poor William . . ." He waved the man and the horse away, and sat down heavily to think things out. Revenge. No, somehow the word didn't fire him as it should. Poor William. Drink William's health. No, no, that was wrong. Drink to William's safe arrival in Paradise. William among the blest. Knight William. Good night, William, sleep well. He took a little more restorative. He had tied the bandage about his head in a careless fashion, and the blood was already creeping through. It was a nasty gash. He couldn't go revenging anybody with a gash like that. Poor William. Rest In Peace. . . . His heavy fuddled head slipped down on to his arms, and he fell asleep, leaning on the table, and never even heard the triumphant shouts in the distance, acclaiming the fall of Limoges.

9

"Do you feel any better now, Edward?"

"Oh, yes. Yes," testily. "Do let's get on with this business of the knighting. Who else?"

"Well — they tell me a man named Falstaff ——"

"Horse-staff?"

"No — Falstaff."

"Very well. Go on, but speak more plainly, I can't hear you when you mumble like that."

"So'd you mumble if you'd had three teeth knocked out this morning with a mallet!"

"That's right, jeer at me because I was too ill to fight! It's like you to mock a sick man when he's down!"

"Edward, don't excite yourself. You know what the doctor said."

"Damn the doctors! What I want is an ordinary report — not all this mumbling and interrupting. Go on, for goodness' sake. This man Falstaff."

"Well, he was the first to arrive at Limoges gates."

"Yes — I'd have been the first there, if I'd been well!"

"*Now* who's interrupting?"

"John, you *must* not excite your brother. He's had a tiring day."

"!!!"

"!!!!!!"

"Well — this man Falstaff got there first anyhow, and attracted the attention of the archers towards himself by riding round the ramparts whilst the others successfully attacked the gates ——"

"Well?"

"Well — does that warrant a knighthood?"

"I don't know. Who is he, anyway? Guido, shut that door, there's a draught down the back of my neck!"

"Nobody seems to know much about him, ex-

cept that he comes from Gloucestershire. I believe grandfather knighted *his* father."

"Very well, that's good enough. Carry on. Give him a knighthood. First come, first served. It'll be a good example for the others. D'you know where he is?"

"Not at the moment. I'll send out messengers."

"Very well. Carry on."

"Falstaff!"

"Where's Falstaff?"

"Where's Falstaff?"

* * *

"Edward, I'm awfully sorry to trouble you again, old man."

"Well — *what* is it?"

"One of the messengers has come back. They've found the man Falstaff at last, but he's terribly dazed. He's got a nasty wound on the forehead, and is out of his armour. He won't tell anyone where it is, either."

"Well, what of it? If you've found him, carry on!"

"What, knight him without his armour?"

"Why on earth not? If he's found, why all this fuss about his armour? Let him be knighted naked if must be. I've *told* you to knight him, and then you come back, just as I've got to sleep, and wake me up to start it all over again. For goodness' sake use your discretion, and get out!"

Considering that Limoges had fallen, the Prince of Wales was really very irritable.

John of Gaunt drank a glass of Burgundy, sighed, and left the tent. He was very tired, too, be-

cause he had taken a much more active part in the day's achievement than the Prince. He sat wearily in a chair dragged out of the royal tent, shivering in the evening chill, and waiting for the half-dozen men who were to be knighted. He had eaten nothing all day and the drink he had just taken went to his head, so that he swayed slightly as he performed the office of knighting and spoke the words more deliberately than was necessary.

When his turn came, John knelt more deliberately than was necessary, too. He felt the sword come rather heavily to his shoulder, and rest there more obliquely than was pleasant.

"Rise, Sir John."

Sir John rose, with an effort, and he and John of Gaunt stood swaying, staring cloudily into one another's eyes. Gradually the most unctuous affability spread over both their faces.

"John?" repeated John of Gaunt, puzzled. "John? . . . They told me your name was William. Ah well . . ."

He gave up the problem, and, more for support than anything else, he put his hands on to the shoulders of the newly-created knight. Having done that, it was incumbent upon him to embrace him. He kissed his cheek.

"There, thash for a namesake, Keepsake," he said, and laughed. All the courtiers laughed politely too, though one raised his hand and said behind it to his neighbour:

"Drunk as an owl again."

"Perhaps," said the neighbour, "but if he's drunk at all, he's drunk with blood," and in an

undertone he proceeded to recount the many valiant deeds that John of Gaunt had done that day.

In Limoges the Black Prince slept well, for the first time in weeks. He had been avenged. Though the offending bishop had had his life spared for political reasons, and a certain body of French knights had had theirs spared for chivalrous reasons, the rest of the town had been put to the sword, women and children and all. Their bruised and mangled bodies lay cluttering the narrow streets, or huddled on doorsteps, while the conquerors dined and slept within. In the early morning the foot-soldiers would clear them away, throwing them into the river as so much rubbish, or into the furnaces of their own burning houses. The town was purged through suffering. The Prince of Wales had achieved his end and aim, and lay peacefully asleep. Occasionally a smile flitted across his tired face, as he remembered his home, his children, his beloved elder son.

And before he returned to England, his son had gone the way of the children of Limoges, though not so painfully. He had died after a short illness, in Boulogne. The siege was up, the small citadel taken, life was extinct. Only the body remained, limp, meaningless, pitiful, an empty house — as empty as the houses of the city of Limoges.

10

THE KING is dead, likewise the Prince. God save the prince's son, King Richard.

Like the New Year, the accession of a new

king suggested unbounded possibilities, and the whole country was employed in making fresh resolutions. Before he died, the Black Prince had, by means of a new parliament, swept the court clear of clogging debts and bad influences; and a year later both had crept in again. Alice Perrers had still ruled not only the King's heart, but the King's household as well, and had begun to put her finger into many a legal pie. Earls and bishops fought for places as governing powers. The court party, for the first time wholly anti-clerical, taxed the country and built a fleet, and taxed again, and the ecclesiastics, secure in the knowledge of their superior ability, smiled, folded their hands and waited.

By his eldest brother's death John of Gaunt had become the most important person in the land, but he suffered all his life from an inferiority complex which made him brag and bluster to secure positions which should have been his by right, and the people who had seen a hero in the Black Prince, chose to see his brother as the veriest Bad Angel. Whatever he put his hand to, turned out unfavourably. His wealth, at a time when the whole country was impoverished through war and plague, weighed him down. The court party, headed by him, caused Parliament to grant the poll-tax, to attack the Bishop of Winchester, and to befriend that suspicious character John Wycliffe. An incompetent soldier, an incompetent statesman, as unable to tell true friends from flatterers as royalty, hissed as he rode through the London streets, the Duke of Lancaster, Earl of Derby, King of Castile, the greatest subject in England, went from unpopularity to unpopularity and

died eventually quite unregretted. If he had been poor, and christened anything but John, he might have achieved something. As it was, he was one of the most magnificent failures of the century.

Chapter V

Middle Age

I

Having had greatness thrust upon him as it were, Sir John Falstaff returned to London. An estate had not yet been assigned him, because at the end of the war there was always a plethora of knights to be accommodated, and not enough other knights died or had their estates confiscated to make up for this. However, by presenting himself every now and then to John of Gaunt, he got a certain sum down, and was promised more. Knighthood must not languish. But he was too late to join in any revelries, for with the accession of an eleven-year-old king and his managing queen-mother, a sober nursery atmosphere at court had taken the place of former gaiety, and Sir John could have got all the nursery atmosphere he wanted down at Falwell. Nell Quickly had received him with open arms, and even the surly host, her husband, admitted his elevation grudgingly, and grew less importunate about his bills; so that for a time he lived in Eastcheap in great glory, reserving all the first floor of the Boar's Head (with the

famous Dauphin chamber with its bow window) for himself and his friends, and doing nothing in particular with tremendous energy all day long.

He was not amazed at his good fortune. He was never amazed at anything that befell him. It was the natural sequence for a man in his position to be first a page, then a squire, and afterwards a knight. His promotion had been more rapid than most, that was all. He did not return to Gloucestershire, contenting himself with a long letter to his relations there, in which he explained William's death and his own change of rank. He had mislaid the men-at-arms somewhere in France, and feeling no fear of contradiction let his fancy roam free as he wrote, until he had evoked a most dramatic picture of rescue and revenge. All unarmed as he was, he had dashed forward into the mêlée, where he saw William surrounded by six Frenchmen, had hacked and hewed them down (thereby receiving a bloody gash on the forehead), but unfortunately arriving a little too late to rescue William. It quickened the blood to read it. After an interval of some weeks a messenger returned from Gloucester, with a reply from Geoffrey.

"Dear John," it read,

"We were all very sorry to learn of William's death, though proud of the part you played in his attempted rescue. How good of the Duke of Lancaster to honour you with a knighthood. Many brave deeds go unnoticed every day, but it is nice to think that your endeavour to save poor William was rewarded. You may be sure that he is praying for you

wherever he is. I hope your scar heals up soon. Fighting never did appeal to me, as you know. We have had a poor season down here. The corn was ruined by the rain, also Nero the bull died quite suddenly in February, so you see we have had quite a lot of misfortune about the place.

"I wonder if you will be coming down here soon, or when the men you took for men-at-arms will be returning. I have as yet had no notification of Falwell being transferred to you, and shall continue to manage it until such notification arrives. But you are always welcome here, as you know, especially for William's sake." (Could one detect a note of irony here? No, Geoffrey had no knowledge of such a thing.) "Your three brats are growing lustily. You don't tell me what your income is now, but I expect you are well able to provide for them. As soon as I have worked it out I will send you the account for their maintenance to date. These farm-people are growing so assertive, God knows where it will end.

"Your loving brother,
"GEOFFREY FALSTAFF."

The account for the children's maintenance arrived some time later, as promised, and Sir John ignored it. This was the first time he had heard of any children, and he preferred it to be the last, for what concerned him vitally was his *own* life, his *own* maintenance, and nobody else's.

The years he spent in London then were among the happiest of his life. Money troubles grew less with the patronage of the Duke of Lancaster to

draw upon, and he had nothing to do but to please himself. Season merged into season, year into year, with the utmost simplicity, and the life that thronged about him adapted itself to the needs and fashions of the moment, as it had always done, sucking him into its very centre like a whirlpool, submerging him, thrusting him up to the surface again, half-suffocated with such surfeit of delight. And after a time, he became a part of the whirlpool, as if scattered on its waters and absorbed, almost losing his own personality in the personality of London itself, but one of many bubbles thrown up from the restless waters to shine a moment in the air, and then perish. Almost, but not quite. It was not in Sir John's nature to be completely absorbed in anything. If he could have been always drunk, always merry — but that was not possible for any man.

He had not shed that occasional depression with his first youth. It was no green-sickness but a perennial malady, attacking him always when least expected, and leaving him the most miserable of mortals. At such times the oddest thoughts would come unbidden into his mind, "What am I? Where am I going? Who will look after me when I am old?" — these and other unanswerable questions took possession of him, to the exclusion of every happy thought. At such times, London seemed to ignore him. He moved in her crowds, a stranger amongst unfamiliar faces — masks at a mystery play, as callous and artificial, and at such times Nell Quickly herself was only a penurious shrew, continually pestering him over unimportant things.

And sharp on the tracks of mental discomfort

came physical. His stomach would begin to trouble him, and the Boar's Head would resound with his groanings and belchings. Sir John had not grown thinner, either, and any prolonged exercise set him panting and sweating. Everything seemed to conspire against him. His heart would lose a beat quite suddenly as he stood at a street corner, and pause, as if uncertain whether it should go on or not, and he would clutch at the nearest wall, waiting breathlessly for normal rhythm to return. At the same moment his knees would turn to water, and his head sag dizzily on his shoulders. He was dying. He was quite sure he was dying. And he would be overcome with sorrow for his own fate. To die so young — he who was going to achieve so much! Poor lad.... Poor lad.... If the Salvation Army had then been in existence, and could have sent an officer to that street corner, he would have found a ready convert, a repentant sinner, desiring to be saved above all else, to be washed white as snow in the blood of the Lamb. But there was no Salvation Army. There were priests but absolution was expensive; and travelling friars, like most gentlemen of his time Sir John detested any flagrant flaunting of poverty.

Nevertheless he did meet a priest, and at just such a time. His heart had played him the old trick, and he had collapsed on the steps of St. Paul's to recover. He was still gasping like a fish stranded out of reach of the water, when he felt a hand on his shoulder, and raised his head. If it had been the Angel of Destruction come to summon him, he would not have been surprised. But it was a Dominican brother in his black gown and hood, with his

face mysterious and hidden within the shadow of its folds.

"Well, John Falstaff?" said the voice, coming strangely and beautifully from within the folds. It was a gentle voice, with a French intonation, far more reminiscent of the court than of the cloisters. Sir John stared and stared. He hoped the man didn't expect him to get up. Having once sat down, it took more than a priest to get him to his feet again. But the priest leaned down, and taking him under the arms, succeeded somehow in lifting him from the ground.

"Come inside," he said, "I think you will be more comfortable there," and with his arm about John's shoulders, he brought him inside the cathedral, and sat him down on one of the benches at the back.

The scene lent the final touch to Sir John's despondent imagination. The whole interior was dark and damp and musty, as if he and the worshippers were all coffined in one enormous grave. He had never been inside the cathedral before, and the vastness of it awed him. He felt insignificant beside the chilly height of the pillars and the yawning vaults of the nave.

His heart had begun to beat less spasmodically, and he settled himself, leaning back against the stone wall behind him. It was like a ridge of ice against his spine, and against the back of his head. At his side his companion was kneeling in prayer, his tonsured head at last uncovered, his meek neck catching the one kaleidoscopic gleam of light that seemed to have been filtered through the stained-

glass windows and to be imprisoned for ever in the building.

Far away up the central aisle a service was in progress. Incense was wafted to Sir John's nostrils, bringing the image of Selby Abbey to his mind more vividly than any time since he had left it. The light was too dim and the distance too great to see the worshippers, but he could hear them, and the familiar yet unfamiliar words. He could hear the priest's voice raised, chanting in earnest supplication, and then the lower-toned responses of his audience. He shivered. He was cold, vilely cold. The Dominican brother had risen from his knees at last, and now was sitting quietly at his side. They turned their heads and looked into each other's eyes.

It was Fleance. Fleance, of all people, to take to the Church! The irreverent thought died in his mind as soon as it was born, frozen to death by the chill breath of reproving angels. He opened his mouth to speak, but Fleance forestalled him.

"You are in trouble," he said gravely. "Can I help you? I should like to help you, for the sake of old times together. We were not very good friends, I'm afraid." He lowered his serious eyes, gazing at his hands as they lay in his lap. John looked at them too. Even in that poor light he could see the change that had overtaken them. Fleance's beautiful hands! They had been his pride, his delight. Now they were chapped and red, ill-shapen from eternal scrubbing and scraping, with broken nails and bulging knuckles. They were not the hands of Fleance at all, but the hands of a servant, mere appendages, ugly but useful. It was terrible, shameful. He felt that he had

been present at a living sacrifice. All the hands of the Saints and Apostles, depicted in the windows around him, held less significance for him than the pair that lay in his companion's lap. Hands of benediction, of supplication, of transfiguration — what were these, compared with these hands of flesh and blood, symbols of a possession renounced, a pride crucified, a sacrifice accepted, without present reward? Or had Fleance his reward? There was something so serene in his expression. The old fretfulness had been wiped from it as completely as if it had never been.... Fleance looked up at him again, expecting his answer.

"No," said John hastily, "I'm not in trouble, why should I be? I get a little out of breath sometimes, and then I have to rest.... How's the world treating you, Fleance?"

Fleance smiled, thoughtfully. A half-moon of shadow hovered on the side of his face, throwing into relief the high prominent cheek-bone. The epicure turned ascetic, John thought. His friend spoke.

"Love not the world," he said, "neither the things of the world. That's what I've left off doing, John. The world's a mirage! It promises — eternally it promises! It leads us on...." He lifted his hands to express himself, and the prisoned streak of light pounced on them viciously, emphasizing with macabre effect every broken nail, every swelling joint. John could not restrain himself. The organ was still playing, the worshippers still chanting, the solemn influence of doom and death was still upon him.

"Your poor hands, Fleance," he said, "your poor hands."

"Pah," said Fleance. "Dirt. What does it matter?" But he dropped his hands into his lap again, and hid both of them within the dark fullness of his sleeves.

"Humiliation," he said, almost as if to himself, "humiliation, that's the secret of religion. We've got to humble ourselves, tear our passions and our desires to shreds, and trample them underfoot. We must give all to Christ. The sacrifice of a broken spirit and a contrite heart, oh God, Thou wilt not despise. . . ."

John fidgeted uncomfortably. This Bible-quoting was unatural and unwelcome. He looked at Fleance sideways from under his sandy lashes, as if to catch him out as a hypocrite. It was no good. Fleance meant every word he said. He *believed* that the world was all vanity, and vexation of spirit, and the fact that he believed it woke a certain resentment in his hearer, almost as if he were responsible for the world which was being so belittled. After all, *he* had found very little wrong with it. *He* wasn't the one to grumble when his luck was out. Fleance seemed to divine his innermost thoughts.

"You love the world, don't you?" he said. "So did I, once. . . . It refused to love me in return. It was harsh, cruel, disappointing. It will be harsh and cruel and disappointing to you — to every one of us. That is God's will. He makes our earthly path a stony one, that we may long the more for the courts of Heaven."

He almost caught his breath as he said the

last words, and his eyes shone, as if the Holy Grail had been vouchsafed him, secret, ineffable, too precious to divulge, too brimming-over to contain.

"I want to tell you how all this came about," he said, "how I came to be changed so." He leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees, and putting the tips of his worn fingers together. It was the very skeleton of his old gesture. Although his eyes were fixed on his hands, now he was unaware of them. He spoke very quietly, as if sure of his listener's attention, and somehow the very carelessness of narrative compelled John to hear. There was something of the old arrogant Fleance about it, that moved him. It was so unconscious, yet so ingrained.

"You remember the day you left Nottingham for London," said Fleance, "after the will had been read? You had learnt that you had been remembered, and I had learnt that I had been — left out. You didn't say good-bye to me."

"I'm sorry," said John.

"No, it doesn't matter," said Fleance, "I didn't mind. My cup of bitterness was already full, and I left the house that evening with all the miserable fury my heart was capable of, awake and stirring within me. I hardly knew where I was going, or what I was doing. I just walked blindly. My world had collapsed, as worlds have a habit of doing."

"Yes?" said John. He didn't want another lecture about the world.

"It's curious, isn't it," went on Fleance, almost as if he hadn't spoken, "how, when any tremendous decision is imminent, one makes up one's mind be-

forehand to be perfectly impartial about it all — to bear the worst with equanimity. And then, when the worst happens, it is always just a little too much. I wasn't sure, you know, all the time. I knew that Sir John was getting old, and forgetful, and that the young one kept a wary eye on the estates. But I hoped.... I'd lost my chance of a knighthood, and I wanted nothing then, but my own house, my own farm, my own — possessions."

He paused. A louder chant was rising from the group about the altar-piece.

"Deposuit potentes, de sede et exaltavit humiles...."

The sound was wafted up into the carved arches of the roof, and came headily down again, dying away into crevices and nooks, and sighing itself to death between the aisles.

"I was proud," said Fleance, "and headstrong. I wanted position and power, and riches. I wanted that estate, just as once I had wanted a knighthood. Well — I got neither." He smiled grimly into the gloom. It was almost as if he were laughing at himself and his wants, so long ago. After a pause he went on.

"Nobody could have called me religious, I think. I went to confession and to Mass like any other young man, as you did yourself. But I did it to humour the Church as much as anything, as one humours an old and querulous relative. No — I wasn't religious."

Suddenly he turned on John. His eyes blazed like sapphires, unearthly, brilliant.

"I had a vision that evening," he said. "It was

after I had walked through the town and out on to the moor. I had been going fast, and my legs were torn with brambles, because I was trying to outstrip my misery. And suddenly I was conscious of a man walking beside me. The sun was in our faces, setting so slowly that the whole heath seemed on fire, and every whin-bush alive with yellow flames. It shone into my eyes, too, so that I couldn't see his face. I was angry, because he kept pace with me, when I wanted to be alone. I wanted to walk on and on until I could go no further, and then fall down and die of exhaustion where I fell. And he *would* keep pace with me. Yet, whenever I looked across at him, his face was shining so with the setting sun that I couldn't see it."

"Yes?" said John. Tales of visions were not unusual. What was unusual was that Fleance should ever claim to have seen one.

"You know how, when one dreams," Fleance went on, "sometimes the faces of those we see are blurred? Yet we *know* whom we see. We don't need features to tell us. Well, somehow I knew who *this* man was, who was walking beside me. It came upon me quite suddenly. It was Christ."

"You mean you were dreaming it all," said John.

"I mean I was as awake as I am *now,*" went on the other. "Well, we walked. He didn't look across at me at all, He just stared ahead into the sunset. And quite suddenly He spoke. 'Follow me,' He said. 'Give up all you have, and follow Me.' I laughed at that. I thought, fancy asking a man to give up all he has, when he has nothing, *nothing* at all! He

knew what I was thinking. He said, 'You have pride and covetousness and anger. You have a wilful heart, and a spirit that stares into the mirror of its own self and sees nothing good reflected there. Give them up, and follow Me.' I was dumbfounded at that. I could think of nothing to say, and for want of anything better I asked, 'How can I follow You?' He stopped walking then, and stood still in the middle of the road. Still I could not see His face because of the westering light upon it. He spread out His hands. 'Feed my sheep,' He said. That was all."

"Well?"

"That was enough, wasn't it? It was a vision. It told me what to do, and a great peace filled me, the peace of a mind set at rest. I had been restless and miserable for weeks, but suddenly my own will didn't matter any more. I knew I should still have to fight it, as Jacob fought with the angel, but God and His Son were on my side. It was my crucifixion. It's still going on. But in the end I shall see His glory!"

His voice was ascendant, triumphant. When he looked at John again his face was shining, though there was little outward light to illumine it.

"I came to London," he continued, "I had never wanted to see London again, so I came. I became a novitiate at a small Dominican brotherhood over in Southwark. I am still a novitiate. I help to prepare the food for the brothers. I gut the fish, and scrape the dishes. We have a small hospital attached to the church, and I help the brothers in there, too. I wash the sores of beggars."

His voice was still exalted, as if he were describing the most transcendental things, but the poor body, obedient in so much, rebelled here, and the fine nostrils quivered as if they smelt the fetid stench of the sick still about them, and the hands, remembering their old fastidiousness, rubbed ceaselessly against his gown to wipe off the recalled contamination.

"D'you call that feeding sheep?" said John. "Brr ——! It makes *me* sick to hear you talk of it! I know you'll say it's metaphorical, but I'd rather do it literally, if it must be done at all!"

"You don't understand," said Fleance, "but you will, one day."

"It doesn't explain your presence here."

"Oh, this is recreation," said Fleance, "I come here once weekly, for my reward. I love this place." He raised his face and looked away up to the dim vaulting of the roof. "Sanctuary," he said, and sighed.

"And when you've finished your novitiate?"

"I shall enter the order, God willing."

"You look forward to that?"

"I don't know. I can't decide. At the moment it seems rather a retrogressive step. The priests themselves are inclined to be — well, worldly. I suppose they're tempted, like other men. I don't know," he repeated, "there ought to be an order more like the order Christ intended — men pledged just to serve God. . . ." He paused. "I shall pray for light," he said, and rose to his feet. Sir John rose too, and together they went out into the warm sunlight again. The younger man stood blinking on

the steps in the sudden sunlight, but the priest had already pulled his hood up, and his face was hidden.

"Well," said Sir John, "it's been nice seeing you again, Fleance. Don't overdo it, that's all. You don't look too well."

"What does that matter?" said Fleance. "I'm happy. I'm doing His work."

"Well, I'm happy too," said Sir John pugnaciously, "and I don't see any visions, and I don't want to see any! Did you know I got a knighthood after Limoges? Yes, and I live in comfort, and do just what I please.... *I* don't find anything wrong with the world."

"Love not the world," said Fleance again.

Sir John was annoyed. Already he had forgotten the influence he had succumbed to in the cathedral, and the sunlight was flooding him through with warmth. His heart was behaving properly again, and he was hungry for his dinner. A young woman with a basket of buttercups gathered from the Strand meadows stood at the bottom of the steps, smiling sideways up at him. Her chin and her cheeks and her bosom and her arms were all aglow with the golden warmth thrown up by the flowers. She held out a bunch towards him. It was very tempting. He stepped down one step, towards her. Once more Fleance put a gentle hand on his shoulder.

"I'm only telling you for your own sake," John," he said earnestly. "We've all got to sin and suffer and repent. I know you think you're self-sufficient, that you use the world only for the pleasure it gives you, that you despise it in your heart.

You were like that as a boy. You're still like it as a man. But it's not true. *No* man is self-sufficient. You may go on as you are doing now for years — still enjoying yourself, still deluding yourself. It will come to you in the end. Something, or somebody, will smash up your whole life for you. The world is cruel, John Falstaff, and man is cruel too, unless God has put love into his heart."

The hand was still on John's shoulder. He sniffed loudly. Yes, Fleance had spoken truly, he *did* clean fish. It was an odour of sanctity one could dispense with. The sun — the sun — how warm the sun was! How it shone on the young woman at the foot of the steps! She was still holding out the buttercups. He turned decisively to Fleance.

"Good-bye," he said, "thank you for the sermon, and the warning. When I repent I'll let you know." He smiled broadly, his full cheeks curving in derisive enjoyment; then he shook one plump finger at the priest. "And let me warn *you,* Fleance," he said, "that you're heading for a martyrdom, with all this nonsense about visions and repentance."

He turned away, pulling on his gloves and walking flauntingly down the steps. At the bottom he turned and shouted, "If you ever want to see me I'm at the Boar's Head, Eastcheap."

Fleance was still standing at the top, with his hands hidden in his sleeves. He bowed slightly, with a grace the coarse black gown could not conceal, and turning, descended the other side. Sir John heaved a sigh of relief.

"Now, child, how much are the buttercups?"

She told him, and he paid her, staring greedily down at her creamy arms and swelling breasts. Beside her he felt extraordinarily tall and benign — a giant almost. Pride puffed him up, and suddenly he seized her round the waist and lifted her struggling into the air, and kissed her. Between them the buttercups were crushed into a yellow stain.

"What's your name?" he said, as he put her down.

"Mysie, sir."

"That's a silly name. I shall call you Buttercup. Do you often sell round here?"

"Every day, sir, as long as the flowers last."

"Very well, I shall come past every day, and kiss you at eleven o'clock, Buttercup. Now run away. And Buttercup, if ever you want me at any time I'm at the Boar's Head, Eastcheap. . . . Oh, and Buttercup, one more thing." He frowned ferociously down at her, but she could see a glimmer of laughter in his eyes. "Love not the world, Buttercup, on any account. . . ."

As he walked homewards he felt pleased with himself. He was sorry Fleance had missed that incident; it would have shown him just how much *he* cared about any advice. He held his head high, and thrust his chest out as he walked. Unfortunately but unavoidably his stomach also was thrust out, and the yellow stain of the bruised flowers became doubly visible down his front. Although he was still pleased with himself his composure was shaken a little by two rude cobbler's apprentices who saw him pass. They called out after him a certain familiar doggerel

which he had himself shouted, long ago, at the young ducklings at Gramercy:

"Yeller Belly, Yeller Belly,
Come and have a swim!"

and peals of shrill laughter followed him as he hastened down the street.

2

To understand the Peasants' Revolt, we must know something of the circumstances which caused it; and this civil war, like ordinary wars, began from no one primal cause, but from a multitude of little causes, each insignificant enough in itself, but summed up together forming cause enough for any war in the world. The Plague was largely responsible, making labour scarce and prices high, and Authority, having sought to remedy this by overlooking the cause and condemning the effects, was inevitably flouted.

For the laws of a country, however good, require adjusting from time to time, and it was no good expecting the labourers to conform to a legal code made for their great-great-grandfathers. They were still the rude unlettered mass, but the Plague had weeded them out and rooted them up, selected them and made them more expensive and exclusive a commodity. It had gone through them like a scythe at harvest-time, and they were still gasping from the shock. Their *morale* was shaken. Stability, the essence of their whole existence, had disappeared. Death had taken, not only the first-born, but the

head of the family and the babe in arms as well. The year's work had been thrown aside. Fields of corn had grown and shed their ripe seed on the ground, undisturbed. Clover had run rampant over the once-cleared fields. The ponds were stagnant again with weeds and fennel, and the fish lay dead on their surfaces. The streams dried up or overflowed their banks without interference, and swine ran wild in the woods and broke through the hedges. Farmhouses and manors, once deserted, crumbled to the ground.

In the midst of this desolation the survivors recovered, and looked around them. Something very like the end of the world had happened, dreadful, incomprehensible. How was it they were expected to pick up their rakes and pitchforks again, and go on as if nothing had happened? They could not understand it; and they responded to disaster in the primitive fashion of their ancestors, by leaving the place where they had lived, and making their homes somewhere far distant. They migrated to the towns in large numbers, or, coming upon a deserted holding, they took it, and lived upon it. What was property? A word, nothing more. Life was momentary, and one should take what one could get, and hold on to it.

And it was this cutting of themselves adrift that really began the revolt, and that frightened every landowner in the kingdom. Vagrancy was an offence, punishable with branding and slavery, but when the whole of the countryside turned vagrant, what punishment could be meted out? The law of the land decreed that the labourers on a manor be-

longed to the landlord as much as the land upon which they lived. With it they could be bought and sold, and divided up in lots. They were there on sufferance, and they knew it. And, as they were responsible to their spiritual superior, the parish priest, for spiritual things, so the labourers were responsible to their temporal superior for temporal things. They could not call their souls their own, but that was everybody's fate but the priests'. They could not call their bodies their own either, which was a far more serious affair. But being creatures of the soil, ignorant and leaderless, in time they might have been shooed back to their old estates, and have taken up their lives afresh where they had left them off. Even the restless attitude of mind that the Plague had bequeathed them would have died a natural death, for much dies out in a generation. But circumstances combined to prevent this. John Wycliffe's "poor priests" had been travelling the countryside, sowing fresh seed for rebellion in most receptive ground, and though they avoided personalities, their hearers chose to interpret them in the most personal way.

"Having eyes, why do ye not see?" they cried to the people. "Is not the wickedness, the debauchery, the profligacy of the Church plain enough for all beholders? Why is the Church rich when Christ himself was a poor carpenter? Blessed are the meek, says the Bible, not in Latin, but in your own English. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth! Look around you. Are the meek inheriting the earth? No, but the Church is! One-third of all England is Papal ground. The Cistercian and Benedictine and Dominican houses are not temples but

market-places. You contribute to them in tithes as you contribute to the landowners in taxes. The Pope is not God's head on earth, when he works contrary to God's will. King Richard is your head. He will see your wrongs righted."

That, at least, is the impression that the audiences received. John Wycliffe's priests had a lot more to say in just as plain English about transubstantiation and heterodoxy and excommunication, but having heard what they wanted to hear the people were off, moving in a restless stream towards London, where their wrongs would be redressed.

They also went to complain about the taxes. A clumsy Parliament, knowing how to extort money but not how to employ it, had had no idea in its head beyond taxation, and had asked impossible sums from the poor, threatening brandings and imprisonments for defaulters. The word Parliament conveyed very little to the labourers, but the words of John of Gaunt were quite enough. Their great-grandparents had suffered under a tyrant named John, and they were not going to do the same! They were out, one and all, for John of Gaunt's blood.

In different counties different leaders arose, fulfilling different needs. Wat Tyler supplied the popular figure of an avenging father. John Ball asked when Adam delved and Eve span who was then the gentleman? Jack Straw breathed blood and thunder, and the melancholy Will Langland wrote effective little rhymes to catch the popular imagination. The Poor Priests, or Lollards, were forgotten, left far behind, with such figureheads to lead the people on.

The insurrection was like the flowing of many

small tributaries into one great river, swelling it more and more until it flows out into the sea — the sea in this case being London. And as the rebels went they burned the manor-houses, and destroyed the manor-rolls, so that the story of their bondage might have an end. And when they reached London — out of nervousness as much as anything else — they killed Archbishop Sudbury, and because they could not find John of Gaunt they burned his beautiful Palace of the Savoy to the ground. They slept in the Moor fields and the Southwark fields at night and went on singing, "When Adam delved and Eve span who was then the gentleman," into the small hours. Others camped out on the Hampstead and Highgate hills, like a besieging army.

And they all of them swore that they would not return home until they had told the King their grievances and he had remedied them, and everything had come off as they desired. And everything did come off as they desired, though not quite in the way they had desired it; but it was all very nice and romantic, with a child-king on a palfrey, and a courageous Lord Mayor, and a lion-spirited crowd suddenly turned lamb-like.

And though they did not get what they demanded all at once, eventually the labourers achieved their ends, not by Act of Parliament, but by *force majeure,* so everybody's face was saved.

3

THE name of Elinor Mowbray has but a brief reign in the Mowbray chronicles. She was not born well —

being a daughter when a son and heir was wanted — she did not marry well, she did not die well; and her unhappy body lies outside the limits of hallowed ground, a perpetual prey for Satan and his ministers. She was the granddaughter of the Sir John Mowbray who had died at Nottingham, and a daughter of the Sir John Mowbray who had followed, all too soon, in his father's footsteps. On the accession of her uncle Thomas to the earldom she had remained in his charge as his ward and lived in Nottingham with him and his young wife.

She had been a strange dumb little girl, and at sixteen she had grown up into a strange dumb woman. In company she shrank into a shell of glazed indifference, sitting with her small hands in her lap, and her head bowed forward over them, deaf and blind to the roistering noise about her.

She was very dark. Her uncle, scarcely older than herself, called her his black Elinor, and joked constantly about the villainous schemes she must be harbouring in her mind. For with the revulsion against the French a revulsion against dark skin and hair had come in English taste, and only a fair skin without was a sign of fairness within. Elinor did not answer any of these charges. She did not understand jokes, and laughter was barbed arrows to her, piercing her very heart. Her uncle and aunt were kind to her but misunderstood her completely, and she was so shy of guests that, though present, they might have been inhabitants of some other earth. Consequently she was thrown back upon herself for company, and so she had gradually evolved another self out of her own personality, with whom

she could converse freely and at ease, to whom she could fly for comfort and understanding, a being who would not and could not fail her.

The death of her father had shocked her terribly, even in that era of short lives and merry ones, and since then she had withdrawn still more into herself, still further apart from the hospitable couple with whom she lived. There had been talk of sending her to a nunnery just outside the town. To her uncle and aunt she seemed an ideal inhabitant for a nunnery, but, like all quiet, apparently meek people, Elinor had unplumbed depths of obstinacy within her, and on the subject of the nunnery she became suddenly and passionately eloquent and resentful, to subside afterwards into a quietness so extreme that it seemed as if that brief liveliness must have exhausted her supply of life for months to come.

After that she grew still fonder of sitting alone at her window, staring out at the greenness with her oblique, dark eyes, and of walking alone through the small spinney on the estate, and through the park among the fallow deer. Sometimes the gardeners caught glimpses of her, gliding like Queen Mab through the silvery grasses in early morning, talking to herself in rapid, quiet tones — too quiet for them to overhear. Once a boy had come upon her suddenly, kneeling by a pool and staring into its mirror depths, pushing her black shining hair back from her face, and whispering spitefully: "Horrid black thing! Horrid black thing! Go away — I hate you!" And then she had ruffled the water with her hand, to break the counterfeit Elinor in the water,

and had spat into it, before gliding away again. She was so much a wild thing of the woods, that she left no human track behind her, and once her light feet had passed over them, the long grasses sprang up into position again, as if to conceal her from possible pursuers.

As passionately as she resented and rejected the idea of the nunnery, so Elinor resented and rejected suitors, and at an age when most young women of her rank were already married she remained virgin and a spinster. For despite her dark skin and sombre ways lovers were not lacking — lovers, that is, chiefly of the Mowbray wealth and the Mowbray name. Since her father's death, however, she had fallen from the position of princess to that of mere lady-in-waiting, and her suitors had diminished in numbers. She had settled for life, it seemed, into one narrow groove of home existence; and after her death her ghost would haunt the place as imperceptibly as her human body had haunted it, and would give as little trouble.

She needed only one year, a couple of years, and habit would have become custom, and custom time-honoured usage, and her rare fits of temper would lie at last so long perdue that they would have no strength to rise again. Then indeed they could have been sure of her. The fiery devotion which she had bestowed on her father, and which now burned unseen in her heart, waiting for some other idol, would have died down into ashes, at first black and bitter, then no more than a thin mist.

But all this was secret from her household. She only conversed freely with that other self of hers

when she went walking in the early morning, "Is he coming? Is he coming? Is he coming?" she asked herself, and her self would answer coldly, "You fool — is it likely anyone would come for you, so black and sad as you are?"

And at other times her self would be kinder. "He is coming," it would say, "braid your hair neatly, put on your cramoisie gown. He loves crimson more than any other colour. He will see you standing like a velvet rose at the foot of the stairs, and he will not notice anybody else. 'Who is that?' he will ask. 'Elinor. . . .' 'Elinor, my lovely one, my rose, my hidden sweetheart. . . .' 'I knew it would be you. . . .' " And then, conversing with her phantom-lover, that other self of hers would melt away, ashamed to interrupt the tryst. And having walked through the spinney Elinor would emerge the other side, breathless with delight and dewy, with parted lips. At such a moment with the spell still potent she would not have been surprised to see a real lover of flesh and blood standing there, his cap in his hand, staring at her.

And it was at just such an inopportune moment that Sir John Falstaff arrived at the Mowbray gates, before the rest of the world was awake. He had dismounted — for no more romantic reason than that his horse had lost a shoe, and his cap was in his hand, and he was certainly staring at her. Behind him two dusty servants lolled half-asleep in their saddles, but she had eyes for none but him. This was her lover. She was sure of that. She was so sure that she almost put out her hands to him, and had to lock them behind her to prevent it.

"Hul-lo," he said. "Are you from the house, sweetheart?"

She nodded. She could not speak. He had called her sweetheart. Now let the world come to an end, if it would!

"I'm going up there," he said, "my horse has cast a shoe. Where are the stables?"

She found tongue enough to tell him; and to come a little nearer. Reaching up her hand, she stroked his horse's nose. She was tall for her age, and slender. Sir John could not place her. She looked too stately for a governess, and she could not be a servant. Yet how else could she be allowed out like this, all alone? It intrigued him. To fill the time ——

"I've come from London," he said.

"London?" she repeated. It had been only a word before. Now it became a litany. Before she could stop herself she had asked the vital question, "Have you come to stay?"

"Have I not!" said Sir John. "I don't ride all this way for a kind word and a cup of ale." Then, as if it were not far too late, he pulled his face into an oddly solemn shape and added, "I mean I have come to see Sir Thomas about work."

One of the servants behind, fast asleep, fell forward on to the pommel. The jerk of his waking started the horses off again.

"Well, I'm off," said Sir John. He put his hand under her chin, raised her face like the cup of a flower, and kissed it.

"Good-bye, sweetheart," he said. "Don't forget me."

When she came out of her stupor he and his

servants had disappeared behind the trees, on the way to the stables. Afraid that her knees would suddenly fail her, Elinor stumbled back into the spinney, and sat on a fallen trunk. Shudders convulsed her thin frame. It was true. Her lover had come, after all. The world was a lovely place to live in. The trees were greener, the sky was bluer, the birdsong sweeter, than ever she had known before. Even her other self withdrew, awed by this glory above all glories.

She sat for a long time with her dark head bent down, and with her dark eyes closed, until the faint quivering light of early morning had gone, and instead day's full blaze shone through the leaves above her. The experience was slowly slowly becoming apparent to her in its full entity. Again and again she rehearsed the encounters, the lover's word, the kiss. Then she burst into tears.

Such joy could not be borne in silence, and she had never learnt to laugh or to sing.

4

If it had not been for the Peasants' Revolt, Sir John would have taken up his life where he had left it off, before Limoges. But the labourers' harsh treatment of lawyers and all their kith and kin had frightened off many a legal-minded young man, and Sir John, not being even that, had reluctantly renounced the idea. In any case his old friends had all finished their courses, and nobody that he knew would be left in Clement's Inn.

So being deprived of Clement's Inn he turned

next to his patron. No estate had yet been assessed him, and as time went by his chances of ever getting one grew fewer and fewer. He would have to see the old Duke of Lancaster about it.

But since the burning of his palace in the Strand, John of Gaunt found the air on his Yorkshire estates more wholesome, and stayed up there, conveniently out of reach. Meanwhile the Boar's Head grew importunate. Mine host was bedridden for life, and Hostess Quickly, who now controlled the tavern, grew more mercenary with the advancing years. Sir John must pay his bills or have an action brought against him. Sir John had filled the place with limbs of Satan and daughters of joy, and the reputation of the Boar's Head was lower now than the marshy ground on which it stood. Canterbury pilgrims no longer used it, preferring the Tabard on Southwark side, and the drunken friends of Sir John who had taken their place were poor customers from the monetary point of view.

Sir John himself was by now not so much a customer as an institution. And he paid less than any institution ever did. Mrs. Quickly was beside herself with impatience and anxiety, and as his kisses and endearments grew fewer her demands increased. If a man could have worn his conscience threadbare with promises, surely the knight's would have been full of holes, but he gave no sign of being worried or distressed, and ate and slept as heartily as ever. There was nothing else for him to do. Everyone seemed to be poorer since the labour upset, and his friends were charier of being lived upon than they used to be. There was no war to go to,

and John of Gaunt was hidden away in Yorkshire. Falwell still remained, of course, but some instinct made him fight shy of the place that had once been William's home.

Then had come the news of young Sir Thomas Mowbray's elevation to the earldom. His chance had come at last. He remembered Sir Thomas as the little fellow in petticoats who had played football with him in Nottingham so long ago. Now if Sir Thomas could be prevailed upon to remember *him*. . . .

So one day, with promises of fame and fortune, he beguiled away two of the Boar's Head pantrymen, took three horses from the livery-stables, and rode away. Mrs. Quickly had cleaned his clothes the day before, and his hair had been combed and explored within the week, so he looked even more imposing than usual. Several people turned to stare at the handsome, stout gentleman riding out of the city, with his servants behind him, and when at the city gates he took out his purse and flung it to a beggar, mothers nudged their children that they might notice and profit by the generous example.

"See the kind gentleman!" they said.

But when the beggar had opened the purse and found the halfpenny usually resident within, his comments were not quite so friendly.

5

Sir Thomas was still in his teens when he became the Earl of Nottingham, but in a time when a man came of age on attaining fourteen years he was al-

ready mature, almost elderly. Certainly Sir John could not recognize in him the once rampageous little boy. Rank and responsibility had aged him, though he had not yet acquired the loose-living ways of his elders and betters. With the dreadful warning of the rebellion fresh in his mind he was determined to be a father to the labourers on his own estate, indeed to anyone who had the slightest claim upon him. Accumulated riches had embarrassed him lately, and expense was no deterrent, when it was a matter of purchasing goodwill.

Consequently Sir John had an easy task. Within two days of his arrival he was made squire, or personal attendant, to the earl, and the other personal attendant had been handsomely pensioned off. It was his business to serve the lord with wine, to act as "taster" in case of poison, and to keep his lord's personal apparel in good condition, no very onerous tasks. Work was also found for the two pantrymen from the Boar's Head, but it was work on the estate, and led to less fame and fortune than to dunging the fields and clearing the hedgerows. In the long years of semi-bondage that followed, they had plenty of time to repent. . . .

On the first evening of Sir John's arrival, when the candles had been lighted and supper laid, Elinor, in her cramoisie gown, came and stood at the top of the stairs. She was trembling with excitement. Ever since the morning she had been on her knees by her bedside, praying that she had not been mistaken, that she had not dreamed it all, that her lover was really here at last. She had hidden away her black hair under a snow-white wimple, and round

her head she wore a narrow circlet of precious stones. Another circlet of precious stones girdled her hips, and it held the blood-red ruby that her father had brought from the East on his return from the Holy Land. Surely he would love her more than ever, now!

From where she stood she could see him standing at the fireside, talking to her uncle. Her uncle's back was towards her, but every now and then his shoulders shook with laughter. How amusing her lover must be! How romantic it was that she did not even know his name! And he did not know hers, either. He had mistaken her for a governess, perhaps even for one of the servants. How great his surprise, his joy would be when she came slowly down the stairs, in her cramoisie. . . . "Oh, rose of love. . . ." Surely the French poets had written something like that. She trembled from pure joy. She could never eat any supper to-night. Manna had fallen from the skies in the morning, and she had partaken of immortal meat.

Her uncle turned and saw her standing in the shadow at the top of the stairs.

"Come along, silly one," he said, "Sir John won't eat you."

She came, blindly, and willingly, so willingly that her uncle was surprised. She could feel his hands on her shoulders, turning her towards her lover. Almost she lifted up her mouth to be kissed.

"This is our black Elinor," said her uncle, "Elinor, this is a friend of mine — Sir John Falstaff."

Before either of them could make rejoinder the

Lady Elizabeth had come rustling down the stairs.

"Ah," she said, "the hostess last as usual. You must excuse me, Sir John. Thomas, you haven't spoken about those candlesticks *yet*. When Ransome cleaned them I used to be able to see my face in them. Well, Elinor love, you're very fine to-night. What is it, a birthday? Thomas, dear, Sir John on my right, and the child on yours, and you might give a hint to the household to eat more quietly. I assure you, Sir John, when we sit down to meat we can hardly hear ourselves think, there is such a clashing and gnashing of teeth from that other table! Thomas, dear, I hope you have apologized for our poor company. Salisbury and Somerset left us only last week, and my brother Arundel arrives to-morrow. Elinor, my dear, eat your food, don't sit in a daze like that. She's wretchedly thin, don't you think, Thomas? And *now,* Sir John, let us hear all about London."

6

That supper was the first of many miserable meals for Lady Elinor. She had seen her lover's eyes for one brief second only before her aunt arrived on the scene, but the second had been long enough for her to see that no flame of ardour still lit them. They were cold, unfriendly — a stranger's eyes, like the eyes of all the other strangers who had ever sat opposite to her at that table. When the meal ended she crept away to her room and sat nursing her grief like a child at the breast. She snuffed the candles that her servant had lit. What use to look in the glass when only a black thing was shown there?

Then slowly she took off her crimson gown, and took the wimple from her head. Her dark hair fell like a shroud about her shoulders, down to her waist, down to her knees. There was so much of it, and nobody wanted it, like the sin that filled the world. . . . Yet between her fingers it was soft and warm.

"This is black Elinor."

"She's wretchedly thin, don't you think?"

And from downstairs she could hear peal upon peal of laughter, her uncle's sudden shouts of mirth and her aunt's shriller echoings.

Yes, Sir John was in good form, to-night.

7

In the weeks that followed, John Falstaff was almost as much exercised in mind as she. He was afraid of her, and dreaded meeting her, of meeting those reproachful dark eyes, still wet from tears wept in private. And from being afraid of her he became annoyed with her. It *would* be some woman who would step in and spoil a cushy job! And from being annoyed with her he became intrigued with her. What on earth could she see in him? For vanity was not a Falstaff failing, whatever else might be. He was good-looking enough as a youngster. Nobody could deny that. But *now*. . . . "Fair, fat and forty," he said as he stared at himself in the glass, "Yes, that description fits you, my lad, as well as any." Yet apparently she *did* see something in him — the way she looked, the way she spoke, when she could bring herself to speak. She was so silent for a woman, too. Well, he gave her up. Her problem

was not for his solving, and instead he turned his attention to the preparations afoot for the earl's journey to Westminster, lowering his eyes whenever he glimpsed the crimson gown glowing among the shadows at the top of the staircase or gliding between the trees. His reasons for ignoring her were plain enough to himself. She was a lady. He had kissed her, admittedly, but he had not known she was a lady then. Now surely it was obvious there could be nothing more between them. He had got out of it as gracefully as possible. If only she would leave him alone!

And because she *would* not leave him alone he was flattered, drawn towards her again, despite her nobility of birth — which cramped his style — despite her thin body and sweet tormented face. And he delayed, very deliberately, the preparations for the earl's journey to Westminster.

The most tragic history in this book is Elinor Mowbray's love for John Falstaff. It was a passion chaste and naked, a sweet oil held within the goblet of her own heart for as long as she could remember, which should have been poured, cherishing every drop, over the feet of kings.... And instead she lavished it, spendthrift, on her unworthy lover (who was never her lover at all), and broke the goblet that contained it in doing so. She had no shame. How could love be ashamed? When she saw that he was inclined to her again she rejoiced and flung her thin arms round his neck.

"Marry me! Marry me!" she cried. And he, usually so voluble in promises, in excuses, found nothing to say. What could he say? He had no

intention of marrying, just as he had no intention of caring for his bastard children. It was himself, himself, *himself* that mattered, and no one else. He put her off at last with fair words, but her soul saw too clearly. Not even the Mowbray name and fortune could recompense the loss of his liberty.

She prayed hard at nights to the Virgin and Saint Catherine, to help her guard her honour — not because there was any risk of its being torn away from her, but because she wanted to tear it away herself, and throw it at his feet. No one will ever know what she saw in the image and likeness of John Falstaff, but it was certainly not the Falstaff that the world in its worldliness knew. It was the deformed transformed, the imperfect perfected, the disreputable sublimated, past all rhyme and reason. It was the very lunacy of love.

The day that the earl sat at Nottingham Assizes she ran out of the house and caught at her lover's stirrup as he sat in the saddle. There were no servants in the yard at the time. She would not have cared if there had been.

"Sir John, when do you go to London?"

"To-morrow."

"Sweetheart . . . ?"

"Sweetheart, then."

He was reluctant, impatient, almost ashamed. She sighed, and laid her head against the flap of his saddle, reaching up her thin hand until it lay on his knee. When she spoke it was rapidly and quietly, in the same voice which she used when she spoke to her other self.

"You won't marry me," she said, "and I've

prayed hard to stop myself from doing this, but I can't. I love you so. Nothing else in the world matters."

"Elinor ——"

"No. Don't speak. I must say what I came to say." She paused, as if to gather strength, then she looked up at him, "Come to my room to-night," she said, and was gone.

Sir John chuckled as he rode up the avenue. New worlds to conquer, that was what he was always looking for. Well, he had conquered something all right, *this* time! He could hardly believe his good fortune. A *lady* to capitulate so, and he had always been scared of ladies! A maiden fortress, never taken before! He was surprised, and pleased. There must be some attractive quality in himself that he had overlooked. He felt well. He had never felt so well — and young! Why, he was far younger than young Thomas, if it came to that! He sang loudly as he rode, sitting well back in the saddle and looking about him as if he owned the place. Yes, when he came to consider it, it would be a wrench to tear himself away from here, and to go to London after all.

8

RIDING back home after the Assizes the young earl was solemn and preoccupied. When pressed for reasons, "It's these cases of rape that horrify me," he said, "there's something so barbaric about them. After all, it isn't as if we lived in the Dark Ages."

"No," said Sir John.

"I'm glad you agree with me," said the Earl.

"Really, from the laxity of the modern point of view I began to think that I must be supersensitive. The Church ought to do something about it. The State ought to do something about it. Yet nothing seems to be done. Well, I intend to start the good work in Nottingham," he went on. "I shall start a committee of public morals. It would make you sick, Falstaff, to hear some of the cases I heard to-day. The immorality in our midst!"

"Shocking," said Sir John.

"You're quite right, shocking. Well, I'm not going to countenance it. If I thought there was anything immoral going on under my *own* roof I'd horsewhip the offenders. I'm not sure I wouldn't have them put into prison for life."

"I should," said Sir John, "marry them, then bury them alive. That'll larn 'em!"

The earl laughed, and rode on.

9

And Elinor waited that night, and her lover did not come. This was a conclusion she had not looked for, and though there was only one way of accepting it, she did not flinch from such acceptance. She had smirched the proud name of Mowbray, for no reason. Now she would renounce her share of that name, without regret.

But before she crept out of the window of her room on to the narrow battlements, and broke her neck by throwing herself from that height into the courtyard, she cut off all of her offending hair.

10

WITH a court divided against itself, England was soon a country divided against itself. France was no longer the sole enemy, and the English lords with their bands of mercenaries were like so many small armies laying siege either against each other or *with* each other, against the Royal crown. Richard, with his reckless expenditure on rubbish, his court favourites, his idleness, his lunatic outbursts of temper, was less a king of England than an emperor of Rome. And there was only one end for Roman emperors. The divine right of kings, which Richard insisted on, was a divinity also distributed between his uncles and his aunts, his brothers and his sisters, his cousins and second cousins, even his uncle's second wife's sister's nephew; and his own position on the throne was not so well-established that they could not all of them, when pressed, produce an equal right. No argument was too fantastic, no tittle of evidence too small, to support that right. The throne toppled, under such circumstances. Whether it toppled because, as he suspected, hands from every county were stretched to shake it under him and to get it for themselves, or whether it toppled from his own nervousness and suspicion, we cannot guess. In any case Richard did not seek to make it secure by his *own* stability. His word was as bad as his bond, poor man. He could trust nobody, not even himself, and he suspected hypocrisy in the face of every subject who knelt before him, vowing the vows of faithfulness and loyalty.

While the barons, with these nebulæ of sceptre

and crown floating ever above their own heads, conferred together in small groups like children on a rainy day, plotting against each other and against the King, for want of something better to do. Whispers ran from shire to shire of "*He* said you said — *We* said they said — *I* said you said ——" and in that hotbed of suspicion and surmise Civil War pushed up its ugly head and flowered once more, fatally, before it came to full bloom in the Wars of the Roses. Richard was not worse served by such subjects than they were served by him. It is questionable whether he would have known a true friend if ever he had had one, for friendship was as mercenary just then as enmity, and could be sold away, or ransomed back, at will. So he bestowed his favours craftily, first on one and then on another, keeping only as permanencies two men with minds weak enough to be vicious and tastes expensive enough to adorn his court. Like dogs, they licked his feet and fawned, and cringed at a blow. Like dogs they showed their fangs when any other object engaged his attention.

But unlike his real dog, the greyhound Philemon, the love of the earls of Oxford and Suffolk for their master was transitory, ermine-deep. For the flesh and blood beneath the ermine they cared not a whit. They took what they could from him, even his last remnant of reputation, and left him eventually, an impoverished and pitiful boy-king, cowering upon an uncertain throne, and waiting for assassination which was all too certain.

Sir Thomas Mowbray was for the moment one of Richard's dearest friends. He was young, and

that was in his favour, and his estates were central. It was good for the King to have a friend in the Midlands, when goodness only knew what Northumberland and his son were doing up in the north, and Lancaster and *his* son a little lower down, and Arundel and Warwick somewhere else. So royal favours were showered upon Sir Thomas, and before very long he had been made Marshal of England for life.

London received him as one of the spoilt children of the realm, and he took a fine house on the Strand and lived there in pomp and glory, with an enormous retinue, at great expense. The meals served at his tables were poems straight from the Courts of Love. Whole bulls, whole boars, whole sows, whole litters of sucklings for a trimming, larks and sharks, peacock pies and swans with their proud heads still frowning down upon the greedy company below, turbot and sturgeon, eels and pike went in procession through the great hall, borne on the heads of perspiring servingmen. And ladies and gentlemen undid their belts and their bodices to make more room, washed their mouths out with Malvoisie and spat the dregs on to the rushy floor below.

From such a scene no one would have guessed that the country had just concluded a very expensive war with France, and was still in debt. In any case it was the fashion to be in debt. The King himself went round with a paste crown because he had pawned his real one for two thousand. Of money there was, and would be for many a year to come, embarrassing shortage. But of assets in the way of French loot, armour and jewels and trappings, silks and satins, swords and shields, church fitments and

church robes, there was enough and to spare. Even the Peasants' Revolt had not done much damage to that.

Toasts went round the table, "Here's to Sir Thomas Mowbray! Here's to the Marshal of England! For he's a jolly good fellow, and so say all of us!"

And when the company had eaten and drunk as much as it could hold, the leavings were thrown out into the street, for canine and for human scavengers, who, if they could not get enough to keep body and soul together, allowed the two to go their separate ways without much murmur, and whose names were duly inscribed in the coroner's papers as "Dead from natural causes, hunger and thirst and cold."

II

The glory of the master was a reflected glory on the man, and Sir John came to London more puffed-up with sinful pride than ever. He enjoyed living in the Mowbrays' house on the Strand, which was very much a palace in miniature. The only thing that he did not enjoy was the proximity of the ruins of the palace which had once been John of Gaunt's, and the knowledge that the old duke was now farther away than ever fighting for a crown in Spain. Apparently the authorities had forgotten all about his own promised estate, but he did not vex himself overmuch about that, for as long as he lived on the Mowbrays he had enough and to spare, and young Thomas would be generous about a pension when a pension was due.

Meanwhile he mixed with the best society and was on slap-on-the-back terms with more than one prospective heir to the throne. Indeed, he would have been an heir to the throne himself if his ingenious mind could have found the least excuse for it, but Clement's Inn failed him there. It taught adaptation, not invention. He renewed his old acquaintanceships with zest. London was still the dear accommodating mistress she had always been, forgiving his long absences as soon as asked, clasping him to her big bosom again, and intoxicating him with the clamorous beating of her heart. He felt again that old feeling of being absorbed, submerged, and then thrust upwards to a light and an air so piercingly alive that they almost hurt. When he walked in the familiar streets, and visited the familiar haunts, he felt that he was still in the days of his studentship. London never changed.

One thing only occurred to trouble his peace of mind, the remembrance of an incident in Nottingham. It was the day that Henry Bolingbroke, Earl of Derby, had arrived to stay there. It infuriated Falstaff to remember so insignificant a fact. Mowbray's brother-earls were often his guests, and like true gentlemen, courteous and friendly to his household, including his squire.

But the Earl of Derby, unlike the others, had chosen to ignore Sir John's presence, turning his attention elsewhere when that boisterous personality first entered the room. He was sensitive to what he termed "vulgarity." But Sir Thomas was not sensitive to that or to anything else. He had even outgrown his immorality complex.

He squeezed Henry Bolingbroke's arm. He was always squeezing someone's arm, or patting someone's back. Bolingbroke shuddered slightly. He disliked personal contact, but he disliked being rude still more, so, though he longed to withdraw his arm from the other's pressure, by an effort of self-restraint he suffered it.

"Bolingbroke," said Sir Thomas, "you must meet my squire. He'll make you split your sides with his stories. Sir John Falstaff — the Earl of Derby."

Falstaff clapped his heels together with a great noise, and bowed. Even while he was bowing his ordinary self-possession left him. The floor seemed to stare up at him saying "Clown! Clown! Clown!" His stomach was enormous. It got in his way when he bowed. His cheeks bulged as he lowered his head, like two full meal-sacks. He knew that when he straightened himself up again he would be scarlet in the face. It was not that he was self-conscious (for he was always conscious of himself), but he was *other*-conscious — this quiet man standing before him, seemed to drain every reason for existence from mind and body. Suddenly defenceless, he felt the old insidious questions jumping at him, out of the depressions of the past, "Who are you? Why are you here at all? What will become of you when you are old?" He felt afraid. Bolingbroke, by doing nothing at all, simply by *being,* had made him feel afraid.

He straightened himself up, and thrust his hands into his belt with his old gesture. Sir Thomas had not noticed anything unusual. He was still squeezing Bolingbroke's arm.

And Bolingbroke was staring through Sir John as he stood there, just as if he wasn't there at all, staring out of the window to the green fields beyond.

"Ah," Sir Thomas said, "you're admiring the glass, I can see." He went up to the window and laid his hand lovingly against the pane. "I suppose you have glass at your place," he said, trying to speak in an off-hand manner, "I simply had to order this. Elizabeth tells me that oiled linen is quite out-of-date."

"Yes, I suppose so," said Bolingbroke absently. He was not thinking of glass, just as he had not been looking at Falstaff. And yet it wasn't rude, in him, somehow. One felt he had better things to do. He crossed the room to the table, and looked at the books which were lying there. Then he took up *The Lamentation of Child Ipotis* and stood turning the pages slowly, enjoying the manuscript more than the matter. He was spare and dark, like his father, and a long sleeveless surcoat, reaching to his ankles, gave him a sombre and judicial look.

Sir John did not bow again. He wasn't seen if he *did* bow, so why trouble? And as far as it was possible for anyone so stout to slink, he slunk out of the room.

As soon as he had gone Bolingbroke raised his eyes from the book in which they had been absorbed. He addressed Mowbray abruptly.

"Where did you pick up that fellow?" he said.

"Who, Falstaff? He was page to my father. Your father knighted him after Limoges."

"Stuff!" The minute the word had come out

of his mouth, the Earl of Derby bit his lips. He hated to lose his temper. Thomas Mowbray's eyes opened astonishingly. "Ah!" he seemed to be saying to himself, "so *that's* the sort of chap you are!" and immediately the two men were measuring swords in their minds.

12

HAVING at last reached a position of esteem, Sir John had a bed to himself, in London. But there was another bed in the same room, and in it three pages slept, their arms about each other's necks, snoring in unison. Sir John lay awake, resenting their snoring.

On previous and painful occasions he had suffered from the pains of over-eating, yet now night after night he bravely dared those pains to come at him again. The food was meant to be eaten, after all, and the drink was meant to be drunk, and by taking both in plentiful quantities he succeeded in swaggering past the first pale sentinel of dyspepsia — but encountered instead the very dragon of indigestion. The next night he drank still more, and as a consequence lay awake till morning, talking urbanely into the alcoholic dark, with the snores of the three pages as accompaniment. Unable to sleep, he felt he must talk — as if talking would exorcise the face of the Earl of Derby, which otherwise loomed palely, an uneasy ghost risen up to condemn him.

The face was so distinct, yet so undistinguished. That was what annoyed Sir John. He had seen hun-

dreds of thousands of faces in his time more worthy of remembrance, yet it was this one that lingered on, with its dulled eyes, lean cheeks, and sullen underlip. It wasn't an ugly face, or a handsome face, just a mask of mediocrity. It didn't gibber or mop or mow at him, as he had heard the bleeding heads of Wat Tyler and his companions on Tower Bridge were sometimes seen to do. It just hovered over him, frowning slightly, with contracted brows, staring through him, whenever he lay awake. Sightless, that was what the eyes were, like the eyes of a stone image, staring unseeing into blind distance. There was something about that face that made his blood run cold.

He lay with his eyes shut, crinkled tightly like a naughty child, growling insults under his breath. He reviled the name of Bolingbroke. He made up verses of doggerel presenting the earl in a most unworthy light. He imagined incidents by the score, all beginning with the ignominious collapse of Bolingbroke, and ending with a magnanimous rescue by John Falstaff. He schemed and plotted terrible things, should the earl ever cross his path again.

And every minute he said to himself, "He's not worth wasting a thought on," and then spent the next minute in composing a bawdy epitaph for the earl's grave. In short, he was feeling hatred for the first time in his life, and it was the most steadfast emotion that he had ever experienced. For weeks no lover could have thought more about his mistress than John Falstaff thought about the earl. Waking and sleeping hours were filled with him. Once he had heard, as a child, that God's Eyes were for ever

fixed upon one, from the other side of the sky. But now, wherever he went, whatever he might be doing, he felt the eyes, not of God, but of the Earl of Derby, always upon him; a little sad, a little disillusioned, looking always straight through him, as if he were not there. . . .

But hatred is bound to burn out sooner or later, and the very fierceness of its flame consumed Falstaff's hatred up, so that when eventually he did catch sight of the earl one day at Westminster, he doffed his hat and bowed again. And this time the earl made the slightest movement with his head for acknowledgment, before he turned his back. The time was an anxious one and he had no words to waste on hangers-on. The King was trying to ride roughshod over Parliament, and the earls of Oxford and Suffolk were riding roughshod over him.

"Gentlemen," the nobles said one to another, "the time for action has come." Then, almost before the words were out of their mouths, events were up and doing.

13

The next few years are unpleasant retrospect, and the part played in them by Sir Thomas Mowbray is not more pleasant than the rest. He was like a pawn who had reached the end of the chessboard and gained the position and power of a queen, and he used that power mercilessly. Bishops, knights and castles gave way before him, or, not giving way, were hewn down, and the King, cowering for shelter, still heaped honour upon the heads of those who were least his enemies. Outlawry and murder be-

came part of the regular machinery of the realm, and the Civil War which flickered fitfully in the Southern counties lit another conflagration in the North, the battle of Otterburn between the Northumberlands and the Earl of Mar.

The Percys of Northumberland were a canny family, and kept themselves to themselves like all good Northern folk. They were rich and powerful in Durham county, and they knew how to mind their own business, which was more than their brother earls did. Neither father nor sons were courtiers, but soldiers pure and simple, and so it came about that they kept well out of the petty strife between King and Parliament and barons, and just had a little war to themselves. But theirs was an honourable war, between Scotland and England, not a scrap between different factions.

They were people of stern countenance, with eyes as hard as Durham granite, and a tremendous energy was hidden beneath their calm — lions basking awhile with their claws drawn in. They lived like kings up in Northumberland, in a small private kingdom of their own, from which they sometimes deigned to sally forth, to aid their overlord. But with the affairs which then stirred the rest of the world, the schism of the Church, the Lollards, the Plague's aftermath, the Peasants' Revolt, and now the King's quarrels, they were totally unconcerned. It was not their business. War was their business, and border-war at that. They lived hard and rode hard and died with difficulty, did the Percys, and their people bewailed them when they were gone, as kings dead before their time. To the

softer Southern nobles contact with the Percys was a mixed blessing. It was like living on a bleak moor, on uncouth food, listening to the wailing of bagpipes for ever and ever. There was no civilization up there, they said when they came home, and they settled down with a sigh of comfort to easy ways again.

When Sir Thomas Mowbray was made warden of the Scottish marches, and visited the Percy home, Henry Percy, named Hotspur, was twenty-four years old. And Henry Bolingbroke was twenty-four, at the same time, while he was travelling in Eastern lands.

The King of England was not yet twenty-four, but he was crafty enough, by then, to send people to inaccessible places when they began to get dangerous. Mowbray was not dangerous yet, but he might be. So he sent him to the marches, and Sir John Falstaff went too. They lived just outside of Berwick in a large damp castle in very bad repair, where they could barely understand the language of the barbarians who served them. The horizon was flat and grey behind them and mountainous and grey ahead, and it rained all through the summer. Sir Thomas came out in spots from eating too much green meat, and the lady Elizabeth his wife refused to stay in so dreary a place, and went home to Nottingham.

It was tedious beyond words after the excitement of London, and Sir Thomas moped. He refused to do any wardening as long as his face was in spots, in case people said he had the leprosy, so he stayed indoors, and sent Sir John to do it instead, and Sir John rode round importantly, visiting com-

plainants, witnesses and defendants, signing innumerable franchises, manumittances, pardons, permits and death-warrants, and thoroughly enjoying himself, at the same time laying up a store of future trouble for his lord, which would last Sir Thomas well over a lifetime.

Sir Thomas felt his exile keenly, yet he dared not complain to his King. In London, he knew he was unpopular since the affair of the minister's executions. He felt ill-used.

He wished that Sir John would feel ill-used too, and, because he would not, but grew fatter and healthier every day, he grew to hate the sight of that beaming red face across his table. He wanted to humiliate his squire, because he himself felt humiliated.

"Do you know," he snapped at him one day, "that you're going bald?"

"That is as God wills," said Sir John, with his mouth full. An unusually pious reply, but unanswerable. The earl tried another tack.

"And you're disgustingly fat," he said. Sir John finished putting another piece of meat into his mouth before he answered. The rich gravy overflowed, dripping down his chin. He wiped it off with the back of his hand, and then wiped the back of his hand on the head of the page who was carrying the wine.

"No, Sir Thomas," he said. "There you err. Not an ounce of superperflervious flesh." (He had dined rather well.) "Well-covered, I grant you," he said, and suddenly he smiled, caressingly and greasily, at the earl, until his whole face was

wreathed in curves. He looked, Sir Thomas thought, like a bronze statue of Bacchus, convivial, pagan, obscene. "Well-covered, I *grant* you," he said again. The earl lost his temper.

"I wish you'd confine yourself to granting things that matter so little!" he shouted. "You've landed me in a hell of a mess with your permits and death-warrants! Do you know that you've condemned to execution a man against whom there isn't a tittle of real evidence, simply on the plea of his enemies? How am I to explain that away?"

He banged on the table to emphasize his point.

"From now on you'll mind your own business!" he said, "and leave me to mind mine. You don't want to get the whole border up in arms against us, I suppose! I'm here for the time being, and while I'm here I'll do my duty by cattle-stealers and everybody else. And you be a little more respectful, Falstaff, d'you hear. For all you know you're squire to someone who *one* day," he paused, "might sit on the throne," he finished, all in a breath.

Sir John rose, swaying perilously. His eyes were rolling in his effort to appear in perfect control of his limbs. Then he leant heavily on both hands across the table, looking down at the earl.

"Not with those spots," he said, and with an expressive whirling gesture he indicated the earl's face. There was a terrible pause.

"Porcupine!" he said, and lurched out of the hall. Long, long after he had gone the earl could hear his rich greasy laughter reverberating down the stairs. The remark had been as meaningless as it was rude — an epithet dropped by a drunken man,

but it hurt him bitterly. His exile became twice as lonely as it had been before.

And when the page had brought the mirror that he asked for, he looked long into it, hardly recognizing his own haggard face under its ignominious veil of spots. Then he put his head down on his arms, and cried, sitting alone in the cold and gusty chamber. Even if "Leper" had been flung at him then, he could have borne it. Or he felt he could have borne it. But "Porcupine!"

14

THOUGH familiarity with the earl had bred contempt in his squire, no punishment was meted out. Falstaff's tongue wagged like the clapper of a bell in his head, loudly and continually, and Mowbray elected to attach no more significance to his utterances than he did to a bell's. Besides, he was used to him, and in a world where changes were not always for the best. He sighed: yes, he would keep him on, though he might be a fool to do it. It was difficult to replace a man, up in this wilderness. But he could not resist a final dig.

"You may think yourself extremely lucky," he said next morning, "to have such a lenient employer. I put up with you because I happen to like you, and because my father would have wished it. But that doesn't say that everyone is made like me."

"It takes all sorts to make a world," said Falstaff.

"Exactly," went on the earl, warming to his

task. "Some are pleasant to get on with, and some are not."

"But we all get what we deserve, in the end."

"Ye-es," said the earl. He looked sharply in his squire's direction, but Falstaff's face was hidden behind an enormous mug of ale. "At least, I hope we do," he added.

"There's no doubt about it whatever," said Falstaff, lowering the mug for a moment, and beaming. "We're all miserable sinners, and it's a small world, isn't it, and every man for himself and the devil take the hindermost. But honesty is the best policy." He raised his mug again and drained it to the very last drop. Sir Thomas cleared his throat, threw down his napkin, and rose from his seat. He was not sure, but he had a suspicion, a very shrewd suspicion, that he was being laughed at. And after all his kindness, too. He stared disconsolately out of the window towards the alien horizon. There seemed no promise of friendship and comfort left in the world. Life was bitter, beyond words. He clasped his hands behind him,

"Oh, Scotland, Scotland!" he said, "you'll be the death of me!"

15

But it takes a lot to kill a young man with most of his life before him, especially when that life holds the faint hope of a crown, and after a while Sir Thomas had learnt to adapt himself, chameleon-like, to his surroundings. He forgot the courtier's manners he had picked up in Westminster, and the

French accent that accompanied them. He forgot the minced oaths that had once prefaced every sentence. He forgot the fine food, the fine clothes, the fighting that went disguised as a tournament, the murder that sat in Westminster hall with a justice's cap upon its skull, the debts, the honour and virtue that went in pawn to buy the King whatever toy he might have set his heart on; the hypocrisy, false friends and too authentic foes.

Instead he filled out morally and physically, and the bleak air healed his skin, just as it blew with chilly gusts through every corner of his mind, cleaning out trash, and leaving it receptive for new impressions. He learnt to eat rough food, and sleep on rough and ready beds, and to ride so long in the saddle that he became almost one with the horse below him. He learnt to administer swift justice, without the hope deferred that made the heart sick and took all charity from any justice. And at last he learnt to accept the immense hospitality of the border-folk without wondering what it might be that they hoped to get out of him.

There was plenty of work for him to do. Apart from the cattle-stealing which was the main occupation of the smaller clans, there were all sorts of bonfires — blood-feuds, clan disputes, and a general fervent restlessness — that needed constant observation that they might be kept sufficiently covered over and dampened down. His area of administration was enormous and he spent whole weeks out of doors. And sometimes, on his way from one district to another, he passed through the Northumberland estates and accepted the Percy hospitality.

And though he only squeezed Henry Percy's arm once, it was quite enough. No word was said, but a look passed between them that turned Thomas Mowbray's heart to water.

The Percys were not a demonstrative family, but they enjoyed the warden's company in their own dour way, and he certainly enjoyed theirs. "It was nice," he told Falstaff afterwards, "to have something to do with civilized people again."

Sir John did not accompany him on his visits. He had been once, and the Percys considered him vulgar without being funny. They were not interested in tavern anecdotes, or even in scandal about celebrated personages. But they were far too interested in the way Sir John had got his knighthood at Limoges for his own peace of mind.

"Great God!" he expostulated to Mowbray, "do they think they're the Spanish Inquisition?" So he did not go again. Instead he spent his days out riding on the moors. He went out after birds and beasts alike, for there was no close season for his game, and he took with him hawks and hounds and fishing-rods. Whatever moved was prey to him, and the chase was as uproarious as the kill, unless it ended, as it sometimes did, in the identical collapse — for want of breath — of pursuer and pursued. Sir John did not do it because he was a sportsman at heart, but because it gave him occupation and a furious appetite; and because it provided dishes for consumption almost as choice as those to be had in London.

London! He trolled a catch to the unlistening ears of space, as he rode homewards through the

mountain mist. He had a feeling that it would not be long before the scene changed once more for him. "Fol de rol rol," he trolled, "fol de rol rol," and the tired hounds behind him pushed their way through the heather with tongues out and triumphant tails hanging low at last.

Chapter VI

Prime of Life

I

The scene *did* change. Sir Thomas was suddenly recalled from the marches and taken back into favour, and thereafter he and his squire travelled backwards and forth, here and there, over the sea and back again, but always on important business. The King himself ruled inoffensively for a time, though his extravagances would haunt his successor's exchequer for many a year to come. John Wycliffe was dead, even if Lollardy was still alive and kicking, and John of Gaunt had returned from his Spanish campaign less disposed to make mischief than ever before. Even the labouring classes had not grumbled for quite a while.

And under Sir Thomas Mowbray's auspices a marriage was being arranged and would shortly take place, between the King of England and Princess Isabelle of France.

"She behaves," wrote the English Ambassador, "with the utmost charm and decorum, and when I asked her how she would like being Queen of Eng-

land, she replied gravely that if the prospect pleased her parents, she would be well-pleased too."

Which was really exceedingly charming, for eight years old. So almost before the funeral bells had ceased tolling for good Queen Anne of Bohemia, widower Richard had razed her palace of Sheen to the ground, and his wedding bells had begun to ring in Paris. It was a wonderful finish for a twenty-five-year-old truce with France, however unpopular that truce might have been at home, and Richard let himself go over it. Perhaps, the young man may well have thought, the grim shadow of assassination had fled at last, and his uncles would leave him to die in his bed, in peace. He feared his uncle Gloucester, his uncle York, his uncle of Gaunt. In his own country, of his own people, he was afraid, almost to death. But here, in France, standing beside his little bride, he felt that in taking her hand in his he also took France's alliance, France's assistance, France's good faith. It had been a brilliant stroke of diplomacy, and for managing that, as well as other things, he made Mowbray Captain of Calais. It was a good job, and it kept him out of mischief. If he could keep all his friends out of mischief so easily!

He turned away from all soldiers, when he returned to London, and though the two favourites were outlawed for life from his court, he filled it instead with clergy and women, vying with each other in dissoluteness and expense, and the greatest city in the world was compelled to support a court which would have disgraced a barbaric village. Now indeed the Lord of Misrule held full sway!

Hard by in Eastcheap, Nell Quickly took no account of politics. It mattered little to her what King was on the throne or what Parliament sat in Westminster. What mattered was that she missed her good knight Sir John Falstaff, and pined during his absences like a mother for her son.

She had not seen him for several years now, and supposed that he had grown too grand to keep up former acquaintances. But when she wiped her eyes with the corner of her dirty apron, it was not the many unpaid bills that she was bewailing, but the absence of the man who owed those bills. She would have forgiven him them all if he would only turn up at her doorstep one day, in silk and velvet, as he had promised. And because he did not come she took less and less trouble to keep up appearances, both of her own and of the inn's, and they went downhill together. Her face was still like a round red apple, but now it was like an apple that has been stored throughout the winter, wrinkled and crinkled, and her completely toothless mouth aged her more than her years. She was still lively and querulous and able to strike a good bargain, but when she sat alone she had got into the habit of crying, quite helplessly, about nothing at all. The Boar's Head did not pay, but then, since her husband's illness, it never had paid. If, as she desired, Sir John returned, it would pay still less. Yet she longed for him to return, and went about the house, from pantry to bedrooms and back again, telling all her servants how pleased she would be to see him again, whatever wrongs he had ever done her, until in time even the servants began to look forward to

his coming, forgetting everything that had gone before.

Yet there was more to it than that. The Boar's Head *itself* wanted John Falstaff back. Without him it was mere plaster and wood — a body without a soul to inform it. He had come to it casually one day in his youth, as to any house of call, and from the first moment he had made it his own for ever and ever. Whatever other guests might come roistering in at its low front door, sitting on the oaken settle at the foot of the stairs, sleeping in the great bed in the Dauphin chamber, the inn remained constant to him, and to him alone. The others were pale ghosts who came and paid their bills, and went to make room, always to make room, for the guest who was no longer guest, but host, owner, lord of the house, of its movables and immovables, of the very ground on which it stood.

Mrs. Quickly had just made up her mind to sell the whole place for what it would fetch, and to return to the country, when the longed-for incident occurred. Sir John came back.

"Oh, Sir John!" she said, and she began to cry. When he had taken her upon his knee, as in the old days, and laughed at her and comforted her, she clung to him as if she would never let him go again.

"The Dauphin chamber is ready for you," she said, lying bravely. "It has been ready for you all this while. Many and many's the time I've turned away a fine gentleman from it, for fear you would suddenly arrive and need a bed."

"How you spoil me, Nell," he said, and kissed

her loudly on both cheeks. Then they sat smiling at each other, a couple of old rascals who both knew too much to believe a word the other said.

"But I can't stay," he assured her, "I'm just back from France, and off to Gloucester."

"Oh, what a to-do!" She began to cry again. "Was there a war in France then?"

"No. I've been in Calais with Sir Thomas Mowbray. I've come home on important business." He pinched her cheek. "You're growing into an ugly old lady and no mistake! Well, Tibby?" The old black cat had risen from her accustomed seat on the window ledge, and was rubbing herself against his leg. But Mrs. Quickly was still concerned with his first sentence:

"But you'll stay the night?" she said. "You can't ride off to Gloucester straight away——"

"I can't indeed," he said, "unless you lend me the horses."

"John Falstaff!" she said. She was so shocked that she even forgot his title, and the ready tears stood still in her eyes, too amazed to fall.

"Many and many's the times you've taken horses from me," she burst out, finally, "and it's the last I ever see of them!"

He put her off his knee abruptly, and stood up, just as he had done in the old days when he grew offended.

"Very well," he said, drawing on his gloves again, "I shall go elsewhere. I thought you might like to help an old friend, that's all——"

"— !" For some moments she was speechless. He stood smiling down at her from his great height,

his fat cheeks curved, his tufted eyebrows like two crescent moons. When at last she was able:

"Do you remember," she said, "a time when you promised to pay me a hundred pounds? Not that a hundred pounds will cover all that I have ever done for you! And you were going to bring your fine friends here, too, yes, and to know the King himself!" She drew herself up. "You're an old wind-bag!" she said, "puffed out with promises. Prick you with a pin and there's nothing inside you at all!"

"You're quite right there," he said, "I could do with a nice fowl and that savoury sauce you were such a hand at making."

She gasped helplessly. It was no good. She couldn't withstand him. He overpowered her, just by filling up the threshold of the Boar's Head, and smiling down at her like that as if he owned the place.

"Very well," she said weakly. "There are no horses in the stables just now, but if you wait till the morning" — how she hoped he would wait till the morning! — "Hugh Maidenlove will go to Smithfield and hire one."

"Not one," he said, "four. I've got three soldiers outside."

He swaggered across to the fire and stood warming his hands at it, and an old, old man who had been dozing on the chimney seat staggered to his feet, and bowing backed away, to make more room for this illustrious personage.

Mrs. Quickly peeped at him through the kitchen door. She could hardly believe he was back. She

cried with happiness as she made up the bed in the Dauphin chamber, and as she cooked the fowl. She even cried into the sauce. And as she carried it in a little of her girlish pertness returned. "I don't believe you have been in France at all," she said, and, "if you have, tell me the latest news from there."

"Very well," he said, "the Duke of Gloucester's dead."

"God rest his soul," she said, carving the bird for him. "Who's he?"

2

THE rest of London was not so ignorant. And Sir Thomas Mowbray, who had had charge of the Royal prisoner at Calais, was least ignorant of all, though for the rest of his life he kept the secret of the way Gloucester had met his end. The mystery surrounding his death put a finger on the lip of mourning. Even the King did not go in black for long, and the rumour that the uncle had been murdered was not quietened by the fact that the nephew immediately honoured the man who had been his keeper. Sir Thomas Mowbray, once Earl of Nottingham, became Duke of Norfolk, and a handful of his brother earls also received dukedoms, including Sir Henry Bolingbroke, Earl of Derby, who became the Duke of Hereford.

Sir John Falstaff seemed then on the topmost step, just waiting for the door of fame to open to him. Before he left the Boar's Head he promised over and over again to Mrs. Quickly everything he

had promised her in the years gone by. And, being a thoroughly silly woman, as in the years gone by, she believed him.

"I shall come back," he said, "and pay you everything in full. I expect I shall be made an earl pretty soon."

Then he kissed her good-bye, and took her horses, and set out for Gloucester in a most cheerful frame of mind. Behind him his three soldiers jolted miserably on the sorriest hacks in all Smithfield. He had temporarily forgotten their existence. Bardolph rode a little ahead of the others, shadowing Sir John closely, and Nym and Pistol brought up the rear. The whole cavalcade was like another Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, with Gluttony leading and Stupidity, Villainy and Drunkenness close behind.

Sir John was not aware of this resemblance. Details escaped him, just as the scarecrow costumes of his men-at-arms, examined in detail, escaped him. The men were faithful and true, he told himself. In mellow moments he was moved almost to tears when he summed up the faithfulness and truth of Bardolph and Pistol and Nym.

Bardolph he had adopted before he ever went to Calais. He had found him in St. Paul's Churchyard, the favourite resort of all drunkards and wastrels, asleep in an open grave, snoring off the drinking bout of the night before. There was nothing to recommend him, except the fact that he had slept all night in an open grave, and that as long as he was kept in drink he never pestered to be paid any wages. If they also serve who only stand and

wait, Bardolph was certainly a servant, for his whole occupation was one of standing and waiting — though he was no ornament to the place where he happened to stand. For he was a small awkward individual, with that benign, slightly stupefied expression on his face that is seen on the faces of both philosophers and of Bardolphs. His clothes were tattered, his hair unkempt, and from his small sharp face a nose like a crater thrust itself out, with the curious dent in the middle, and lava-like carbuncles surrounding it. Bardolph was a mild little man. He had never intentionally hurt so much as a fly in his life, but he lived under an unlucky star, and strewed disaster behind him wherever he went — still quite unintentionally.

Nym and Pistol's villainy was of a deeper dye, Heaven only knew what they had been in their time — hired mercenaries, pickpockets, assassins, the lowest of the low. But beneath their desperado exteriors they were true cockneys and sentimental in their heart of hearts; and having been chased off the ragheaps of Europe for the past ten years they were homesick to see London again, the London where they had been born. Now it had been easy enough to get over to France under pretence of fighting for king and country, but not so easy to get home again, when no payment was proffered. Before meeting Sir John they had haunted Calais harbour for weeks, pouring a piteous tale into unwilling ears. They were filthy, and as ragged as Bardolph, so their luck for weeks had been more kicks than halfpence. In fact they had almost settled down to the prospect of haunting Calais harbour for life, eking out a

meagre living from guileless travellers, when their luck had turned. They had met Sir John when he had come down to see about a boat. . . .

Now there is nobody quite so easily deceived as a deceiver, and Sir John swallowed their story at one sympathetic gulp.

"You're a Londoner, sir," they said, detaining him like the Wedding Guest. "You'll give us an 'elping 'and, won't you?"

They had called him a Londoner. Sir John could not have been flattered more. The milk of human kindness had risen in him suddenly to boiling point. And afterwards it had overflowed to the extent of making him pay, for the first and only time in his life, for somebody else. He had not paid the proper sum due for their passage — that would have been too much to ask — but he had tipped a sailor to smuggle them under canvas, out of the harbour. The crossing had taken a week, in an open boat, but it had been worth it, to come home again. Sir John and his three villains had rejoiced.

Sir John still rejoiced, as he passed out of Newgate on his journey west. Here he was, in the prime of life — surely fifty, or just over fifty, was the prime of life? — still of sound mind and body, and if no richer in pocket than he had ever been, at least a hundred times richer in experience. The world had been his oyster, and though he had found no pearl inside it, there still remained a succulent morsel that had slipped all too quickly down his throat. That was the only fault he had to find with life — it passed so quickly. The older he grew, the more quickly it passed. He sighed at the thought.

But as he rode, he despised those poor-spirited people who allowed themselves to be cheated out of a full experience, just as, when a child, he had despised his clodhopper companions at Gramercy. One had to take all one could get. He realized that, now. And if it meant living to a hundred to run the full circle of enjoyment, well, he *would* live to a hundred, if he died doing it!

It says a great deal for Sir John's resources that he *could* be enjoying himself so that morning, and looking back with such satisfaction, and forward with such hope. For in an ordinary case a man of fifty who finds himself penniless, homeless and worthless at a blow is more mournfully employed. He thinks of time wasted, ambitions shattered, hopes destroyed. The future is a hideous necessity, the past a miserable mistake. Not so Sir John. After years of worse than incompetence at his post he had been fully and finally given the sack at Calais. His list of offences had been endless, and included forgery, bribery, blackmail and treason.

"For far less serious offences," as Sir Thomas had pointed out, also fully and finally, "your betters have been hanged, drawn and quartered. I could have you thrown into jail even now for life. But I can't make up my mind to do it. We have been through so much together. I'm afraid you have no moral sense, Falstaff. I had hoped that with advancing years this might have grown up in you. Well, it hasn't, and I cannot give you the post as my squire any more. You must shift for yourself hereafter. I imagine that after all these years in my employment you have managed to put by a competence

sufficient enough to give you a modest income for life. If I were you I should go home again, settle down quietly somewhere, and live upon it."

Which only shows, that if a man is really unobservant, he may live half his life with another man and know no more of him at the end than he knew of him at the beginning. Sir John had naturally saved nothing, and what little accidentally remained in his pockets he had spent in a spree that last night at Calais. French wine and women had done his body no good, he knew, but this last night they should both have a chance to do their worst. And after that he had been carried home to his lodgings at three in the morning, shouting "Vive la France!" with a fervour so tremendous that a Frenchman himself could never have displayed it. And his departure, at a later hour, had held more haste than dignity....

The "urgent business" of which he had spoken to Mrs. Quickly, was a visit to Robert Shallow, Esquire, lawyer in the county of Gloucester, the object of it being to borrow money to keep himself and his three servants. The idea had come to him whilst crossing the Channel, and, though he was not too sanguine, the scheme was certainly worth trying on. If Robert Shallow refused, there were plenty of other rich men in the world.

To John Falstaff every man of means was a potential moneylender. Though poor himself, he felt no envy for rich men. Schemes of state ownership or of the equal division of property would have roused him to derisive scorn, if he had met with them; and in this he was a true mediævalist.

No one wanted equal distribution of property. Such a state of things might be ideal, just as dying and going to Heaven was ideal; but despite its obvious attractions no one was particularly eager to achieve this latter end, or to see the former state of affairs come into being. It was against the laws of nature, the laws of England, and the laws of God.

In fact, all that the malcontents found wrong with the present system was that the money was in the wrong hands; and the only ideal division of property would be to see their neighbours with their noses in the mud, and their own feet on their neighbours' heads — a point of view which has persisted, without much opposition, down to the present day.

But Falstaff was no malcontent. He had long ago given up any idea of acquiring money by honest means himself; but for that reason he did not sit biting his nails, committing the sin of covetousness. His philosophy told him that God gave the first man money, and the second man wits with which to monopolize it. Well, he had the wits and he would use them, either in taking an honest penny out of a blind man's mug or a pound from a rich man's purse. Except that he meant to get more than a pound from Robert Shallow.

It is a strange thing that sometimes a thoroughly virtuous man will admire another for the sake of the villainy that is missing from his own disposition. Robert Shallow was just such a man. He was not taken in by Sir John, even in his student days, but that was not because of any particular pertinacity. Sir John's character was an open book for all to read, though it might be written in thieves'

cipher. At Clement's Inn, though Shallow was senior both in age and learning, he had conceived a kind of hero-worship for Falstaff. He had had no ambition to model himself on his hero, or to try to become a braggart and bully himself. He knew it would be impossible, just as it would be impossible for his own shrunken little form to fill out miraculously to a full-blown imitation of his hero's form. But for that reason he did not cease admiring both.

The first time he had ever heard of Sir John was when, as a boy, he had heard the Falstaff groom repeating to the Shallow groom the incident of Master William and the manure-heap. Perhaps even at that early age the first seed of friendship had been sown. He had so often wanted to push in Master William himself. Sometimes after that he caught a glimpse of the bastard Falstaff in Gloucester city, walking between his more respectable brothers. Young Shallow had been lonely, then. But his father was a *nouveau-riche,* and the Falstaff boys were not allowed to play except with other children of noble blood. They had scowled at him across the street, he remembered, and the younger of them had spat into the gutter. "Jew!" he heard them say, and he had turned away, the hot tears smarting behind his eyes. What was the use of his father's telling him not to worry, because when he was a man he would be able to buy up Falwell and do with it as he liked? He could not buy friendship and companionship. And all the time he had his back to them (picking miserably with his little forefinger at the bubbles of the new paint on his father's shop), he had been conscious of a muttered colloquy going on over the

road. Then he had felt a hand on his shoulder, and had turned round to stare up into the face of the bastard Falstaff, a cheerful red grinning face, with a mop of untidy hair above it.

"Got any money?" John had said.

"Y—yes."

"Let's see the colour of it then."

Eagerly, much too eagerly, the little Shallow had produced his week's allowance from his pocket. John took the five pence, bit each penny separately, transferred it to his own pocket with a sleight of hand young Shallow could not follow, and laid a heavy friendly arm around his new friend's shoulder. Then he shouted across the street,

"Garn, go home, you little ninnies! We don't want YOU!"

And afterwards there had been an hour of lollipops, and sticky bliss. Perhaps that incident had sealed their friendship, though neither of them any longer remembered it. Since they had come to manhood's age forced loans were conducted on a more kingly scale, and it was no longer five pence that Sir John meant to take from his friend, but five hundred pounds. That ought to last him for a bit, even in London. He deserved a holiday in London, after the past ten years. He would board and lodge at the Boar's Head, and spend his money on whatever took his fancy, and he would utterly scorn the Mowbrays, even though they went down on their knees to beg him to return to them, which they were pretty sure to do. . . .

Sir John grew so cheerful at the prospect of his return to London that he began to whistle *"Dieu*

vous save, Dame Emme," a song of more length than sense, as he and his companions rode out of Newgate and along Watling Street. He was glad he had been strong-minded enough not to succumb to the first temptation, and settle down at the Boar's Head the minute he arrived there. It would be much more fun with some money in his pockets.

The weather was September, mellow and golden. Every tree had turned prodigal, and showered gold upon Sir John as he rode. He took it as an omen of good fortune. Ah, it was good to be back again, to smell the English air, full of the bittersweet smell of bonfires, to watch the placid ribbons of smoke ascending into the air. The hills of Highgate and Hampstead had turned bronze under their bracken. London behind lay golden in a soft and golden light, Eldorado in very deed and truth. Gloucestershire was as yet invisible, but the harvest there promised to be as golden as the harvests that now lined either side of the road.

"God preserve Robin Shallow until I arrive," thought Sir John piously. "After that, he may die just as soon as he likes."

One new fact became apparent to the travellers. The further they journeyed into the country, through the small villages, the more often they came upon strange little crowds gathered in the open, sometimes in the market-place, more often on the village green, and in the centre was a preacher, preaching at all odd hours of the day and night.

When they met with the first little group Sir John and his men reined in, thinking to hear some information about the Philosopher's Stone, or to see

a dancing bear, or even a person fallen down in a fit. But it was nothing but preaching, strange uncouth preaching, in the English tongue. Sir John was moved to scorn.

"Good gracious me!" he shouted over his shoulder to his followers. "Did you ever see such a thing? For the first time in my life I see a friar about his business, instead of begging from poor people, and seducing their daughters behind their parents' backs!" And after that, as they travelled they were constantly passing the same curiously intent little crowd, gathered round a similarly poorly-clad individual, listening thirstily to the blunt pungent phrases that fell from his lips, as if the message he carried was indeed the Word of God. Their tattered clothes aroused Sir John to scorn again.

"What has come over them?" he asked. "Is the Church composed now of Bardolphs and Pistols? I never until now saw a friar, who could not by promise of pardon or threats of punishment to come, take the velvet coat off a rich man's back and wrap himself in it without rebuke."

But Bardolph was better informed. "Lollards, that's wot they are," he said, picking his teeth with the tip of the short dagger he carried, and sucking at them afterwards thoughtfully. "I 'ad an uncle was one, once. Balmy. You know that song 'Pop goes the weasel'? Well, the Lollards use the same tune but they sing 'Pop goes the Pope' instead."

Pistol suddenly drew his sword and waved it round his head in a terrifying fashion. "Death to the Traitors!" he roared. Nym winked reassuringly at the others. "D.T." he said, then he reined in beside

Pistol. " 'Ere, 'ere, 'ere," he commanded. "Not so much of the circus act." This strange counsel succeeded in pacifying Pistol, and he dismounted his hack by the act of merely straightening his long legs and standing on the ground, until the horse walked from under him as under the arch of a bridge. Then he caught hold of Sir John's bridle, with one hand, and snatching an antique peaked cap from his head with the other, disclosed an untidy head.

"*Pardon,* gracious seigneur," he said. "Pistol abases himself."

"Come on now, come on now," said Nym testily. It was quite evident that if Pistol abased himself much further his long nose would be rubbing in the dust. "No, you can't say a piece of poetry now, Sir John's in a hurry." He waited until Pistol had mounted again, then added apologetically to Sir John: "You mustn't mind if 'e bursts into poetry every now and then, sir. 'Is mother was a *jongleuse* and took 'im all over the place when 'e was a kid. It's in 'is constitootion, and it 'as to be got out."

Sir John, still mystified, nodded understandingly.

"I like a bit of poetry myself at times," he said. Then he forgot the subject. And he would have forgotten everything else as he rode, in the enjoyment of the mellow September surrounding him, the golden leaves of the autumn trees above him, like a thousand golden laurel-wreaths hanging above their darling, except that when he had passed about the twentieth wayside preacher, and encountered the twenty-first, there was something familiar about the face of the twenty-first.

The gospel he preached was familiar, too. "Love not the world," he said, and Sir John, riding by in the dusky warm of the evening, knew again that it was Fleance, the squire turned Dominican monk, the monk turned Lollard. He had paused a minute at the wayside, to reassure himself as to that identity, to listen to that voice, shorn now of all old affectations, and the dusk had dropped like a dividing curtain between the knight and the priest.

But Sir John had time enough to see how Fleance carried his age. He was still spare, and upright, like a man who had been bearing a great burden, and had even then paused to straighten his back. His eyes were still keen, and piercingly blue, but his chin now wore a grey beard an imitation of his master, Wycliffe. "Hmph, what a life!" thought Sir John, as he rode onwards. "What a waste of existence! And yet I suppose he's enjoying himself, somehow. Poor old Fleance."

He wondered whether Fleance had found his ultimate occupation at last, in the society of "men, pledged to serve God." Well, whoever Fleance served, he would be a good servant. He had always been that, working his fingers to the bone, if need be. For a minute the image of St. Paul came to Falstaff's mind. Fleance was like St. Paul — as hard-working, as fastidious, as forced to endure the common lot. He had despised his own body, too.... Well, each to his own taste. Sir John spurred his horse to a quicker pace. There was no ale-house in sight yet, and he meant to put up at an ale-house for the night.

3

PUBLIC opinion was very much surprised at the inclusion of Henry Bolingbroke's name in the King's new honours list. But then Henry Bolingbroke was himself surprised, because he had had very little in common with the earls-appellant, Mowbray's fellow conspirators, and yet he too received a dukedom. The most extraordinary things were always happening to Henry Bolingbroke, without any striving after them on his own part. For he was a man of sober character, who would have been content to plod onwards, carving out a life sufficient enough for his own requirements. Yet Fate seemed determined to make him spectacular — to lift him up and whirl him round, leaving him at last blinking in the limelight, a little uncertain of the right course to adopt.

He was uncertain now, and yet gratified, for he thought that perhaps Richard wished to make amends for the way he had treated old Gaunt, his father. And despite its unexpected bestowal, his title became him more than most men, and the inherent dignity of his mien and manner grew more pronounced. "A likable fellow," Mowbray told his wife, and after that he cultivated Bolingbroke more than ever. "You must remember that we are still neighbours," he said, squeezing that still unresponsive arm.

Sir John was now on velvet too. He had exceeded his dearest hopes with friend Shallow, and had come away from Gloucester the richer by a thousand pounds. Yet, before he had spent more

than half of it, news had arrived of the honours list. His heart leapt. Surely *this* elevation gave opportunities of a fresh start with Mowbray! That very same evening he sat down and composed a letter, so innocently fulsome, couched in such forget-me-not language, that it would have melted the hardest heart. It certainly melted the new-made Duke of Norfolk's.

"You are an old sinner, Falstaff," he wrote back, "still, I will give you another chance. But you really must promise to work harder this time. Perhaps you were not altogether to blame for your Calais behaviour. It was a demoralizing atmosphere, and I am glad to be out of it at last." (Did Gloucester's ghost still haunt the dungeon there?) "No, I have no positions to offer to your new friends. If you wish to employ them you must do so on your own responsibility. I am glad to hear that you managed to save five hundred out of your wages with me, it shows that you have more prudence than I gave you credit for. But, as you say, the sum is not really sufficient to keep a knight in the position he is accustomed to. Your old post of squire is already filled, but I can offer you a new post as head steward of my estates. Does that appeal to your wandering temperament? If you care about it, come and see me at Beaumanor, Norfolk.

"Yours ever,
"Norfolk."

So for a year Sir John became head steward to the Duke of Norfolk, and soon there was very little

ground in the South of England which he and his three satellites had not covered, and his face became familiar at every tavern along the way, so much that cautious ale-wives, seeing his approach, locked up their valuables and gave no credit. Sometimes Nym sang for their supper, or Pistol would be persuaded to recite one of his long tales from Chaucer or the minstrelsy of the French Courts of Love. Entertainment was infrequent in quiet country places and so was often more welcome than money.... Bardolph could still do nothing for a living but haunt Sir John, and Sir John had made it almost a point of honour with himself never to spend money on food when it could be got without.

It was the kind of life that suited Falstaff perfectly — a careless roving gypsy life, with someone to bully at every journey's end. And at the final journey's end the renewed hope of that pension, when he grew too old to work. Not that such a thing seemed possible, just then. No son of Adam ever felt less mortal.

Gratitude was a strange sentiment to him, but he came nearer at that time to feeling grateful for being alive than he had ever been before. Here he was, still in the prime, with comparative honour and riches, still his own master. *His own master.* That was the real pull that he had over everybody else. He was bound to neither man, woman nor child, and neither man, woman nor child was bound to him. Oh, blissful freedom! Oh, birthright unsold for any mess of pottage! Life was still his to do as he liked with. He drank it in gloriously through every sense.

And then, at the very moment when he felt

happiest, highest on his peak, catastrophe brought his world tumbling about him.

4

The Duke of Hereford had been staying with the Duke of Norfolk, on one of his new Sussex estates, and together they were riding back to the court at Westminster. Sir Thomas was gay in a dress of Lincoln Green, on a Barbary mare, whose trappings were also green to match her master's. He whistled as he rode, looking about him for new worlds to conquer, but Sir Henry rode silently, his head bent forward in reflection, his russet clothes like Autumn following Sir Thomas's Spring. Events always moved too fast for Henry Bolingbroke. He would have liked to have been able to put his hand out, and hold back for one moment the ever-revolving wheel of circumstance; not because he wished to put everyone else's spokes out of action, but because he wished to find out exactly where his own spoke functioned. He was extraordinarily conscientious, at a time when consciences could be bought three a penny, and he wanted to serve his God, his king and his country and his family to the very best of his ability. And considering this business of service often kept him silent, even in company, just as he was silent now.

"Penny for your thoughts, Hereford."

"My dear Thomas, they are not for sale." Sir Henry raised serious eyes to his companion's face, and for a second's space Sir Thomas felt exactly as Falstaff had felt when that face had looked at him — as if he were transparent. But he flattered him-

self he knew Hereford too well now to be put off by any stand-offishness. He reined in his mare a little nearer to his friend.

"I know what it is," he confided, "you're wondering what to do with your manor farms."

"No," said Sir Henry. He was still looking more or less through Mowbray, when suddenly he smiled. The spell was broken. The stand-offishness had gone. He had the rarest smile, and Mowbray was quite charmed by it. "I was wondering why on earth I had ever been given them," he said.

"Fool!" his conscience whispered, "to confide in Mowbray of all people! Why not shout your private opinions from the housetops and be done with it?"

The smile faded from his face, and his expression became again remote, clouded, withdrawn. Yet he had to go on speaking. He knew that if he stopped Mowbray would rush in with conjecture where angels feared to tread.

"I suppose," he added, "young Richard is trying to apologize for the way he treated my father. He's treated him rather shabbily, you know. Perhaps he thought this would be a delicate way of making amends."

"Put not your trust in princes, my dear Hereford," said Mowbray. He was very pleased he had thought of that. It lent quite a dramatic touch to the scene. ("What a pity!" he thought, "that this conversation should be unrecorded. That remark of mine ought to go down to history.")

"What exactly do you mean?" said Sir Henry.

"Well, er ——" said Sir Thomas. It was really

a little difficult to say what he *did* mean. Old Hereford was so confoundedly touchy.

"Well, er ——" he repeated lamely. "He's not overfond of your father, is he?"

"Exactly what I've been saying," said Sir Henry. Really Mowbray was quite childish. "But that's no reason why he should be at daggers drawn with *me*."

Silence fell between them, a silence all ears now, greedy for any hint of treason. But Mowbray was too excited to be aware of it. He came so close that the calf of his leg was squeezed painfully against Sir Henry's leg.

"Oh, *damn* the man!" said Sir Henry's inner self. "*Damn* him for busybody ways, his beastly familiarity! I positively cheapen myself by associating with him." And his horse, startled by sudden spurring, leapt forward into a gallop.

But Sir Thomas would not be put off. He had not been Marshal of England, Warden of Scotland and Guardian of Calais for nothing. Surely he was qualified to give advice by virtue of the positions he had held. He spurred the Barbary mare. When he caught up with Sir Henry:

"I only want to warn you, Hereford," he panted, "the King ——"

"The King has assured me of his affection for me!" said Sir Henry. "That's enough, isn't it?"

"Put not your trust in princes," said Sir Thomas again. (It really was a shame about this conversation just being spoken into thin air, as it were.)

"Meaning?" said Sir Henry dangerously.

"That our Richard is mortal, my dear Here-

ford, and not to be believed on his promises," said Sir Thomas, so glad to get it out at last, that he remained ignorant of the trap laid for him.

Sir Henry did not answer. His head drooped forward again as if he were suddenly tired of the subject, and his mount slowed down into a trot. There was no particular hurry, now. He had caught up with one event, at least. He had even got ahead of it. He smiled grimly. And there was no charm in his second smile. . . .

Alas, alas for Sir Thomas, that his wish about this conversation going down to posterity should be granted him!

5

EVERYONE who knows any English history knows the result of that conversation. The Duke of Hereford carried the poison carefully and dropped it into the King's ear, though it did not bring about quite the effect that he had hoped for. Again events moved too fast for him. Richard's fear was suddenly awake again. If Mowbray, his trusted friend, the object of so much lavished honour, could breathe treason, what of the other lords? He shivered. John of Gaunt's shadow oppressed the court, though he was safely up in Yorkshire, and this sober son of his, who spoke so little, what schemings might not be going on in *his* dark head?

So, though he had been ruling quietly for a while, this affair brought all the tyrant out in him again. He could trust nobody. Even if he allowed this duel to the death between Hereford and Norfolk, that would only rid him of one of his enemies.

He refused to allow the duel, putting them off with fair words.

And then, quite suddenly, he banished the pair of them from England, the Duke of Hereford for ten years, and the Duke of Norfolk for life. It was a bitter exile for both of them, and poor Sir Thomas did not survive it a year, dying in Venice of pure mortification.

And Henry Bolingbroke, Duke of Hereford, forced once again to wandering over the face of the earth, found much matter for reflection in the happenings of those last few frantic weeks. . . .

6

It is commonly supposed that drink and misfortune are what cause a man to take to bad ways, but whether these two evils together influenced Sir John Falstaff in the slightest, or whether he would have gone downhill without them, is a matter open to conjecture. His own spirits were certainly too light to influence his downward travellings, for he took what befell him as philosophically as ever.

"I knew it was too good to last," he told Bardolph and Pistol and Nym, speaking of his late stewardship, and all together they returned to London, taking up their quarters again at the Boar's Head.

Mrs. Quickly welcomed him vociferously. And just as vociferously she refused to welcome his followers. "What do you want with servants here?" she said. "Let them forage for themselves, Sir John." But Sir John would not, and ultimatums were

bandied between them for some time, ending as always in the capitulation of his hostess. He was glad, he told her, to settle down to a quiet life again, after all his roving up and down the countryside.

But Mrs. Quickly soon perceived that his mode of living had changed somewhat since he was last there, for he now slept for a good part of the day, and instead was out all night with his three followers. And despite her questionings he refused to tell where he had been, or what he had been doing. Still, there was nearly always money in his pockets, the sight of which was surety of the promise that his debts to *her* would be one day be paid in full.

She used to observe him sometimes as he lay asleep. He seldom troubled to remove his clothes these days, and so carried a perpetual and individual odour about with him, of sweat and sack and leather. She still loved him dearly, despite his enormous and ever-increasing girth. There could never be too much flesh to clothe that triumphant spirit. . . . But from time to time she grew worried at his increasing shortness of breath, and wished he would take life more leisurely, as he had promised to do. "You remember the trouble you used to have with your heart, Sir John," she said.

"Why should I remember anything so unpleasant?" he replied. He had not been troubled with his heart for years. Even that occasional lowness of spirit had given him the go-by lately. So he pinched her cheek, and told her to mind her own business, which after a while she consented to do. His nefarious activities still continued, but soon they were inculcated into the general routine of

Eastcheap, and though for a year a gang of desperadoes succeeded in terrorizing and robbing Londoners at night, their methods were so varied and their scenes of action so widely-spread, that no one dreamed of associating them with a respectable old knight spending the twilight of his days in peace. Especially as the same old knight complained loudly and continually to whoever would listen, that the watch system in London was an open scandal, and that he was thinking of putting forward a proposal in Parliament for adequate and armed supervision of the streets at night. "Otherwise," he always added, "honest citizens cannot sleep safely in their beds."

Nothing came home so clearly to Sir John just then, as his ability to start his life afresh. He did not regret Sir Thomas, just as he had not regretted Clement's Inn, or Sir John Mowbray, or Falwell, or Selby Abbey. He lived in the present still, as he had always lived, and it was sufficient for him, for he was still like a schoolboy, delighting in playing perpetual truant, in foregoing any drudgery. He knew somehow that the Boar's Head would not house him for long this time. As one grew older the pace of living accelerated, and more and more variety had to be compressed into a smaller and smaller space. . . .

"John o' Gaunt's dead," announced Mrs. Quickly one day. "He was a friend of yours, wasn't he, Sir John?"

"He was," said Sir John. "Bring me some sack to mourn his passing in."

But he knew as he drank his sack that he was celebrating not only old Gaunt's end, but the end of another phase of life for himself.

7

WITH the old lion of Lancaster dead and the young lion safely banished, Richard dared to grow bold and domineering. The country was still impatient, waiting for a call to arms, and as it would be in bad taste to take them up against one's father-in-law, the King turned from France to Ireland for his scene of action. The Earl of March had recently been killed there, and though one earl more or less made little odds, to open a campaign out there would keep the other earls employed, and at the same time prevent the continual scandal that was their peace-time occupation.

But a war, though often a help in time of need, was an expensive hobby, and Richard was nearly bankrupt. London itself, of generous reputation, had grown close-fisted lately, and had refused to vote any more money for anything unless Richard's private accounts were examined; an abominable invasion of the divine right of kings which of course he had no intention of granting.

"But it's for a *war* this time, don't you understand?" he cried to the rich merchants fretfully. "You were always on at me to spend money on something *useful,* and now when I find it at last, you refuse to help me!"

The merchants were apologetic but unmoved.

They were not nobles, so war and rumours of war woke no responding thrill within their hearts. Instead it conjured up unpleasant visions of ships lost at sea through piracy, and valuable cargoes gone west instead of east. Besides, they had no faith in Richard as a soldier. The only spurs *he* had ever won, they said, were in a raffle at Paris Gardens. The King turned from them in disgust. He must look elsewhere for the money for his campaign. He let his eyes wander greedily in every direction in search of gold, and at last they caught the gleam of the immense Lancaster riches, lying unclaimed now, and unprotected, up in Yorkshire.

He was never so sure of the divine right of kings as when he swooped upon those riches, carried them off and utilized them in equipping his army for overseas. Then he sailed for Ireland, thoroughly pleased with his own ingenuity. Money gave one advantages that could be obtained in no other way. He would return to London richer, more powerful, more kingly than ever before.

But he never got the chance. Fate, by linking haphazard incident to incident, succeeded in bringing to pass one of the most astounding and bloodless revolutions the country had ever seen. The people of England were like a cornfield, the whole thing was like a great wind sweeping over the cornfield, so unanimous, with a pressure so evenly distributed, that it brought not even a wren's nest, balanced between three grasses, to the ground.

And the corn, having bent with the wind, rose again unharmed, to find another sun on the horizon.

8

Once again events had moved too quickly for Henry Bolingbroke. He had broken his contract of exile and had returned to England in the character of an outraged son and heir — and instead he had been received as his country's saviour. Indeed almost before he was properly aware of it he was already on the throne, Henry the Fourth, and first of the long line of Lancaster.

As to which of the two was more amazed, the King deposed or the King-elect, no one will ever know. It seemed to them that they were mere head-pieces in some vast and intricate game, planted and supplanted by the volition of a mysterious, invisible hand. The country however was more prosaic in its explanations, and rejoiced to see this new temperate majesty. Indeed Henry had become as popular overnight as a new fashion, and even the fact that his father had been John of Gaunt did nothing to deter his admirers. It was no good laying the sins of the fathers on the children, or expecting the virtues of the fathers to appear in the children, as they well knew. So they cheered him deliriously as he rode to Westminster Abbey on Richard's horse, and they cheered him deliriously on his way back to the palace, where Richard's greyhound Philemon awaited him, as thoroughly converted to his new master as any changeful man could ever be.

In Pontefract Castle Richard drooped miserably, and the shadow of assassination loomed larger and nearer than ever before. His fate was almost upon him, and he knew it. It was little consolation

to realize at such a time that his suspicions, in *one* case at least, had been well justified. Lancaster had the crown. And Lancaster had something else which endeared him to his subjects, something which Richard had never had — a son. A son. A Prince of Wales. A *preux chevalier* for all England to take to its heart, to that secret place where Richard had never penetrated. Reflection was indeed bitter as aloes, useless as women's tears.

But mewed up in London, Queen Isabelle did not cry.

"You don't want to cry," her women told her. "You're a big girl now." So she waited, frightened but still faithful, staring out of her window with large eyes, to see what strange new things would happen in this strangest of strange lands.

9

The Percys of Northumberland having been amongst the first to rally to the new king's standard, were rewarded among the first, and Henry Percy was loaded with honours. Three castles were given to him, and a salary of three thousand a year for being warden of North Wales, constable of the castles there, and general tutor and guardian to Henry Monmouth, a small boy who combined in his own person the personalities of Earl of Chester, Duke of Cornwall and of Acquitaine, and Prince of Wales.

Henry Percy took his duties seriously. He was a superb organizer and soon had a large and trustworthy staff, kept busy running off their feet in sea-

son and out, for he was the soul of nervous energy. It was almost a physical pain for him to sit still, or even to watch others sitting still. He had no time for dalliance or diplomacy. "I'm a plain man myself," was a favourite remark of his. He was not especially intelligent, though he had a canny flair for the right action to take in an emergency. The initial Boy Scout, he loved an outdoor life, and was always prepared — but he lacked the ability — to do a good deed every day, nor had he ever learnt to be kind to old ladies or to animals. His men loved him. And the children in the land that he harried were sent to bed with the name of a bogey called Hotspur sending cold shivers down their backs.

The most unromantic man, if he is given almost unlimited power and has the sense to use it, always becomes entangled in a web of romantic legendry, and so it was with Henry Percy. He was not ignorant of his reputation, and liked to be feared, but what appeared to him to be Northumberland justice often turned out in the milder air of Wales to be rank cruelty. For he belonged to a race of Hectors and Amazons, who hung their defeated opponents up in cages on the walls of their castles and slaughtered men as they slaughtered beasts with no regard for the niceties of battle.

At the time he was made warden of Wales, Henry Percy was thirty-six. He almost lived in the saddle, riding like a demon from Chester to Flint, Flint to Conway, Conway to Denbigh, and Denbigh to Carnarvon, with the Prince of Wales always accompanying him. It was a hard tough life for a boy, and Henry Percy hoped it would turn him into a

hard tough man. They slept little, and ate enormous meals in complete silence together. And neither of them was in the least aware of the thoughts that went on in the other's head.

While Scotland and Ireland lay dormant for a time, Wales kept her warden busy, and in the mountain mists Richard's friend Owen Glendower and the ap Tudors played at hide-and-seek with Henry Percy, destroying castle after castle, and disappearing again into the mountain mists before he could catch up with them, with the agility of their own Welsh goats. Henry Percy despised such warfare. It was cowardly, degenerate, unmanly. He quite unburdened his mind about it to Henry Monmouth. But whatever sort of warfare it was, it was efficacious enough, and almost under his nose the Welshman finally captured Conway Castle, and tore down the King's flag from its proud battlements.

This was an insult not to be brooked. He did not often write letters, but he sat down then and there and wrote to the King.

"I shall recover Conway shortly," he wrote, "but I admit that it was unfortunate it was ever lost. I have been so busy lately with the other castles that perhaps I neglected Conway. Of course the whole lot are shamefully under-garrisoned. Perhaps you could get something said in Parliament about it. We want knights and men with a stomach for war, preferably old campaigners. . . ."

He also added that he would be glad to receive his wages, which were somewhat overdue.

"Dear Percy," the King replied, "Your letter to hand. I quite realize that your wages have not

yet been paid, but as you know I am still very much hampered by the debts incurred by Richard, so that I cannot promise anything this year. The trouble I had with the Scots was expensive, too. Perhaps I might have gone out of my way to help you, if I felt that you really could not avoid losing Conway. I must say that it seems a serious blunder to me, despite your lack of adequate garrisons. It seems to me that the root of the trouble is nothing to do with garrisons at all, but with their dastardly method of fighting. The Scots are the same.

"I have taken note of your remark about fresh recruits. Wales does not offer any great attractions to a soldier, but I have put the matter into the proper hands, and you may be sure it will receive attention. As long as you keep me informed I will always do what I can to help you, despite my lack of funds."

None of which was exactly encouraging to Henry Percy. When the letter arrived he read it once, tore it up in a fury, and refused to speak for two days.

Henry Monmouth went out birds'-nesting with the pages.

10

THE first "old campaigner" with "a stomach for war" who came to fight under Henry Percy's standard was Sir John. He arrived at Chester Castle late one evening, followed by his three men-at-arms. But the host was not at home and it was only after half an hour of furious backchat with the gatekeeper, that that gentleman could be prevailed upon to

lower the drawbridge, and let them in — a circumstance which ruffled even Sir John's sleek plumage of self-satisfaction. He could not know what a terrifying object he looked on horseback, with a Spanish helmet, curved and embossed like a dragon's head, and an enormous sword at his side. He was very angry. To have had nothing to eat all day, and then to be kept waiting in the drizzle, while a rotten little Welshman squeaked at him through the keyhole, was intolerable!

Once in, he strode across the courtyard as if he owned it, gave voluble instructions about the disposal of his horse and his servants, and crashed his way into the castle.

"Sir Henry is out!" the seneschal told him, indicating an uncomfortable wooden bench in an ante-room. But Sir John would have none of it.

"Show me upstairs," he said. "I'm Sir Henry's best friend. He'll be horrified when he hears how you've treated me. And get me a meal prepared at once — a large one."

After that he stormed into the great hall, and flung himself down in a chair at the table. Servants and men-at-arms — poor mice playing in the short time that the cat was away — soon miraculously disappeared. This might well be a friend of their master's, judging by the way his habits resembled Sir Henry's. And before very long a steaming saddle of mutton was placed before him.

"Ah!" he said, rubbing his hands, "the only good thing that ever came out of Wales!" and he fell to as if he were famished.

When nothing was left but the ribs, and he was

wiping the last rich gravy-grease from his chin with the edge of the tablecloth, he was content. Food could always be depended upon to restore his good humour. He swivelled round in his chair to the fire, leant back in it with his legs in their leather thigh-boots thrust outwards, and his stomach thrust upwards into the air, a majestic curve whose gravity was only disturbed by an occasional hiccup. Then he shut his eyes, and folded his hands into his shelving lap. Bounty and goodwill spread over his countenance. Unmentioned blessings radiated from the bald centre of his head. He was just . . . falling . . . asleep.

"Well, Fatty?" a clear voice said, breaking into the august silence with the suddenness of all things out-of-place. "Are you sure you've had enough?"

It was rude. It must be a boy. Before Falstaff had opened his eyes again he knew it must be a boy. He narrowed them to a cautious slit, and peered round the dim shadowy hall. There was no one. Yet there was laughter — he was sure he heard laughter — an elusive bubbling treble in the air above his head. Suddenly he drew his legs in, sat up straight, and looked around him again. There came a flute-like note, bold and cheeky like a blackbird, from up above.

Then the creamy glimmer of satin caught his eyes, shining between the carved pillars of the gallery which ran right around the room. The boy seemed to know he was discovered, for he stood up suddenly, flinging one slim leg over the banisters, following it by himself. He hung for a moment like

a monkey in dizzy space, and then dropped twelve feet to the floor below him.

The hall was a large one, but he slipped across it like greased lightning, and stood balancing himself on tiptoes, his hands on his hips, smiling down at Falstaff.

"Are you Percy's son?" said Falstaff. He had not known Percy had a son. It would be as well to be on good terms with him, if he had.

"God forbid," said the boy.

Very well, thought Falstaff, there is no need for any good terms after all. "Then who the devil *are* you?" he said.

"Who the devil are *you?*" countered the boy. Falstaff wished he would keep still, instead of balancing lightly on his toes like that, like a creamy bubble swaying. It was tantalizing. It put him at a disadvantage. *He'd* learn the young rascal to be impudent like this — if he would only get near enough! He sought to trap him with friendly banter.

"Oh, I'm King Henry Always-broke," he said. "Didn't you know?"

"Really?" said the boy. *"I'm* the Prince of Wales."

They smiled affably at one another — the old villain and the young one — taking each other in. It was quite apparent that they needed no further introduction — as if the very goddess of knowledge had drawn them both at that moment to her knee, and had enclosed them both with the same wide understanding arm. They did not speak, being content to take in each other's outward semblance more slowly than they had divined the inner.

Henry Monmouth stood looking down at a fat old man sprawling in a chair, dressed in a short jerkin of leather and long leather thigh-boots. His head had a bald, pink, shining spot fringed with a halo of hair, so fine, so ruffled and so silver, that it might have adorned equally well the head of an aged and untidy archbishop or of a very fair baby. It stood on end, perpetually taken by surprise, and the tufted silver eyebrows were perpetually surprised too, overhanging those rolling blue eyes. Everything about him was in the same condition of stained ruffled surprised untidiness, as if he had got dressed in the dark in an immense hurry about a fortnight ago, and had never had a moment to straighten himself out or tidy himself up since.

Yet none of these things would have held Henry Monmouth's attention for very long if it had not been for the liveliness which accompanied them. That was what intrigued him. He had seen plenty of fat old men already, but he had not seen a fat old man so bursting with suppressed energy, even whilst sitting down. It intrigued him. The intrusion of this old man into Henry Percy's own hall intrigued him. The visible and audible enjoyment of food that he had just witnessed intrigued him. He had been bored, until this old man came. He hoped he would not have to go away soon, and came closer, smiling down at the object of his attention.

Falstaff looking up saw a dusky boy dressed in cream-coloured satin, with dark cropped hair and a dark fringe shadowing his brilliant eyes, standing hovering at his side like a moth, a creamy moth with blurred wings from which pollen like a flower's

pollen would drop if one touched it. Yes, to touch such a thing would be to contaminate it for ever. He stared and stared. He had never seen a boy so dusky, so fragile, so ephemeral. Even the dark head was balanced on a neck of such slenderness that it seemed it could be broken between finger and thumb.

Yet these qualities of themselves would not have been sufficient to attract him. He had seen beauty and fragility before and knew that, of themselves, they wilted. They were not sufficient. What intrigued him was the hint of toughness that underlay them, the impudence that had answered *his* impudence, the fiery spark of humour that was brother-spark to his *own* humour. He rubbed his eyes, both to rub away the last remnant of sleepiness and to see the better.

"Have you come to see Percy?" asked the boy.

"Percy, you young rascal, is that what you call your master?" said Falstaff, utterly delighted.

"I'll 'master' him!" muttered the boy, and he frowned. A sullen underlip was thrust out, reminding Sir John vaguely of some other sullen face he had seen somewhere, he could not remember where. He stretched his arm, and seizing one of the crystal buttons that fastened the boy's yellow vest, he pulled him forward by it, until he stood close to his knee. Henry Monmouth was still sulking, and would not look up. His long dark lashes lay against a cheek grown crimson with the remembrance of some injury. Underneath them the brilliant eyes were hidden; beauty drowned in two dark pools. Sir John marvelled. Except for that one brief interlude with Elinor Mowbray he had never been so close to per-

fect loveliness before. It was so unsmirched that it seemed impossible. It had the shining waxen delicacy of water-lilies and sea-shells.

His own grossness of mind and body came nearer to revolting him then than ever before. But the sense of revulsion was too strange to him to last long. He twisted the button between his fat fingers.

"Where is Henry Percy?" he said.

"Out riding somewhere." The boy waved his hand vaguely. "He rides all day, you know. He was to have taken me with him, but I hid up there, and he couldn't find me. I don't mind laying siege to castles and cheering the men on, but all this garrison inspection makes me *tired!*"

"When Henry Percy was your age he was at the siege of Berwick," said Sir John.

"As if I was ever allowed to forget it!" said Henry Monmouth. He paused. "Do you like fighting?" he asked, then without waiting for an answer, "I should think you'd just about break the back of any war-horse, wouldn't you?"

At that all foolish ideas about contamination and grossness went out of Sir John's head. This was nothing more than the good old impudence of boyhood, and it should be dealt with in the good old way. He released the crystal button only to take a more comprehensive hold....

Which explains why, when Henry Percy came stamping upstairs a few minutes later, he found an uninvited guest sitting in his favourite chair, with the heir to the throne across his knees in an attitude suitable to punishment, and a pair of royal legs

wriggling and struggling to avoid the heavy and uninvited hand.

II

WITH France quiet, Scotland fairly quiet, Ireland more or less quiet, and Wales theoretically at least under the control of Henry Percy, Henry Bolingbroke had breathing-space to look at his accounts. They were not pleasant reading, and they grew less pleasant as time went on. Poor man, he must often have thought that no king ever spent so much money on warfare, or saw so little return for it. He knew that he was hopelessly in the Percys' debt already. He knew that, at the present cost of living, he could not afford to reduce taxation, and by that means rekindle his waning poularity. The ends he wanted to achieve were solvency and peace, and all his life he strove to make these two ends meet. It was not granted him. Richard's mysterious end hung like a Damoclean sword above his head, a perpetual menace. It was a large black stain on a conscience so comparatively clean that as a consequence it showed larger and blacker than ever.

But there were some who did not believe, or pretended not to believe, that Richard was dead at all, and who by the judicious use of rumour — that close ally of all unrest — kept a curious uneasiness alert in people's minds, and more than uneasiness in Richard's own county palatinate of Chester. He had used his Chester archers to good effect during his life. Now they were almost prepared to avenge his death.

Dullness is a fatal mistake in royalty. Henry

Bolingbroke was a dull king, and the mob would have forgiven him anything but that. His efforts to keep out of debt they mistook for niggardliness, his sensible abandonment of the useless Scotch and Welsh campaigns as faint-heartedness, even his gracious consideration of their welfare in everything he undertook was conduct as unbecoming as it was unusual, in a king.

His final quarrel with Henry Percy over the Scotch prisoners lost for Henry Bolingbroke the love of the lords, as he had already lost the love of the commons, but between losing the two he turned for a moment from conciliating the laity to try to conciliate the Church. Hitherto England had been alone in Europe, in that her laws provided no especial punishment for heretics, but now, recognizing these to be a menace as serious as insidious, which struck at the very heart of good government, Henry brought his own country into line with France and Castille, Luxembourg and Naples, and the act of *de heretico comburendo* became the most notorious event in a singularly unnotorious reign.

The Church was zealous in heresy-hunting, punishing the dead as well as the living, and nearly fifty years after Wycliffe's death his body was dug up in Lutterworth and his bones thrown into the river, where ultimately they must have been disseminated almost as widely as were his followers. For the Church was the sacred arm of the law, and though it refused the responsibility of administering punishment itself, no one could deny that *that* arm was the one which thrust the ferrets of mere secular law down the rabbit-holes of heresy.

So it was that a convocation at Canterbury tried the first case of heresy, in a clergyman, and *de heretico comburendo* first came into force, condemning the first man to be burned alive in England since Christianity dated its calendars.

Thus treason against Holy Church was finally punished as severely as treason against the King.

12

Sir John was a little depressed as he rode home to London. He had not done so well out of the Welsh campaign as he had hoped. The castles had been old, cold and unfurnished, and food supplies scanty beyond all words. Owen Glendower seemed at last to have all the Henrys in league against him, even the King himself; and still he lived like a king in his *own* mountain fastnesses, and still he brought terror down into the English plains. It was no good. Wales had won, without troubling to fight even one pitched battle. There was no pay forthcoming and no loot. Henry Percy was inaccessible, fighting now with his father against the Scots, and the King and his son had returned to London. There was nothing for Sir John to do but return to London too.

And this time something more personal than the Boar's Head drew him there — the presence of the Prince. Since the first memorable occasion, when the truth of the boy's position had been so forcibly indicated by Henry Percy, their meetings had been as clandestine as lovers' meetings, and had yielded as much mutual delight. Indeed the most foolish step the authorities ever took was to make forbidden

fruit of a friendship between the two. If ever anything could have cemented the friendship, *that* did. To sanction it, to give them *carte-blanche* of each other's company, might eventually have exasperated the one and bored the other to tears; but to forbid their ever seeing each other again! The truant spirit in both rose gleefully to the occasion.

They behaved quite fatuously: they sent screws of notes to each other by means of servants — glorious farragoes of rubbish and abuse from Falstaff, and boyish, illustrated scrawls from the Prince. They invented secret signs. They made rope-ladders out of windows, and master-keys to doors. They disguised and dissembled and bribed and lied. And when eventually they *did* meet, the few stolen minutes together were a bliss all the more precious because they *were* stolen, and were to the proportion of the risk involved....

Henry Monmouth enjoyed it because it was fun to feel he was getting the better of his tutor, Henry Percy, and Falstaff enjoyed it because his soul was flattered enormously by this attention from youth and princehood. Besides, he was paying off an old score to Henry Bolingbroke, in making friends with his son.

But apart from circumstances which, given their two rebellious natures, would in any case have coupled them together, there was a strange yet entirely natural affinity between them, which made the coupling doubly sure. It gave the lie to the assumption that crabbed age and youth cannot live together — for they were as young as each other in endeavour, in adaptability, in overflow of spirits —

and they were as old as each other in the wickedness of this world, in a certain ironical appreciation of each other's guile, in wit and in intelligence. That casual meeting at Chester Castle had already forged an invisible chain which linked them to each other. Like twins, sometimes born with their bodies conjoined, even so the minds of Falstaff and the Prince had become conjoined, and the volition of one would vitally affect the volition of the other, in this world and even for evermore.

One incident only delayed Sir John and his servants on their homeward journey. They had stopped at Wallingford for a rest and a drink, intending to push on again at night, when news of a heretic-bonfire had come. So they stayed to see the burning; that is to say, Sir John watched from the upper window of the inn, which looked on to the market square and gave an excellent view of the stake, while Nym, Bardolph and Pistol pressed among the crowd, reaping a rich reward as pick-pockets. The crowd was too busy discussing the affair to observe them.

"Who is it?"

"It's a Lollard priest."

"They asked him to repent, and he wouldn't."

"Mummie, what are they burning him for?"

"It's only a foretaste of hell-fire, they say."

"Poor man, I wonder if he'll suffer much."

"Don't be silly, Martha — you can't suffer if you've got Satan in the system as he has."

"Mummie, what are they burning him for?"

"Move back there. Make way. Don't crowd the prisoner. . . ."

"Yes, you must be right about Satan. *He* doesn't look a bit repentant or afraid."

"See, they're pouring oil on the wood, to make it burn the faster."

"Come on, Jeff. Danged if I'll come to Wallingford again. There's no chance for jugglers if *this* sort of entertainment's free to all. . . ."

"Make way there. Keep back. Keep back."

"Mumm*eee!* What are they burning him for?"

"Sh, dear! He's a bad man. You'll understand when you're older."

Which brings us to the last time Sir John ever set eyes on Fleance. As before, there was a crowd round the Lollard priest, intent and gaping, but this time it was not to hear him preach, but to see him burn.

There is a kind of curiosity which holds no hint of callousness, even at such a time. Sir John might have turned away from the scene before him, but he had seen far worse sights than that which he was now to see — and he had no pity for Fleance. Why should he, when Fleance had no pity for himself? His own flesh did not wince when the fire was well away, and the flesh of Fleance shrivelled and burned. The priest's body had mattered so little to him that now, after he had finished with it, it was fitting that it should be utterly consumed. Sir John did not even sense the shame of such an end. He had no sense of shame himself, and Fleance would not be ashamed, but proud, of the very thing which brought this end about.

So he watched, interested, from his upper window. The crowd was silent, gaping. The only sound

was the crackling of the wood as it shifted under the flames, the gradual widening of the circle of spectators, and the fretful crying of the child who wanted to be lifted up that it might see the better. Fleance himself did not take advantage of his martyrdom. His communion was no longer with the crowd, but with God. Apparently he felt no pain, though once the faintest shiver of disgust passed over his features as the increasing smoke blackened his face and his hands. A few minutes later his body, rigid until then, collapsed within the ropes that held it. But death itself came to him with merciful privacy, shrouded in clouds of smoke.

The heat was tremendous, and beads of sweat ran down Bardolph's and Pistol's foreheads as they moved among the crowd, which spread ever into a wider and wider ring as the fire blazed higher and higher. Nothing was any longer visible at the stake but a shimmering scarlet haze with something black at the heart of it. A man on the outskirts had fallen on his knees, and his prayers for the soul of the departed ascended into heaven with the increasing odour of roasted flesh.... The child was crying again.

"Mumm*ee!* I wanter go home! I wanter go home!"

When the people at last dispersed, feeling that they had been cheated out of some experience, they knew not what, Sir John, in his upper chamber, stood up straight:

"God grant me such an end," he said.

But he knew that he did not deserve it, and when the three pickpockets returned he sat down at

the table with them, and with an air of great impartiality divided what they had stolen into four heaps.

It is characteristic of his immense power of bluff that not one of them made any murmur at this.

13

AT Westminster the King was too engaged with acidular correspondence between himself and discontented subjects to pay much attention to his eldest son, and so Harry Monmouth was allowed to go his own way — a road which led him invariably towards Eastcheap. Once there, he became the prey of all bad company, though he never lost that arrogant aloofness of spirit inherited from Henry Bolingbroke. That is to say, he would ape a serving-man, and don a leather apron for a prank, but he would have you to understand, all the time, that underneath he was the Prince of Wales. Because he was forbidden to travel alone to and from the palace he took with him as companion a friend called Ned Poins; though this companionship did not, as he hoped, exempt him from all suspicion.

Ned Poins was the Public School type. He had the supreme and necessary quality of being a "good mixer," and his brain was as undeveloped as the day it had first hardened into bone. Like a chameleon he adapted himself to the colour of his surroundings, whether they were the royal purple, or the brown of common clay. Of no particular class himself, he was equally familiar with *all* classes, and combining the vices and virtues of all, typified on those rare

occasions when he was not busy "adapting" himself to some particular situation — a healthy, wealthy, young ne'er-do-well, less the especial product of his own age than a familiar species of every age.

Sir John Falstaff took no more notice of him than he took of the Prince's shadow, for in his eyes the two were of exactly similar size, shape and substance. He knew that the Prince's purpose was to see him, and that Poins was no more than a cloak to cover that purpose, and he rejoiced, flattering himself all the while that he was *not* flattered by such attentions, and that his head was *not* turned. He told himself that his sojourn at the Boar's Head this time was like all his other sojourns there; and that the Prince lent only an especial flavouring to what was already a most appetizing dish. He always believed the things that he told himself.

And really, life was so full for Sir John, just then, with drinking and dicing and wenching and practical joking, that it left very little time over for coming to conclusions. That was an old man's occupation, and he was not old. He could never remember a time when he had felt younger, healthier or more out-of-debt. True, his bulk was increasing day by day, until it puzzled Mrs. Quickly to know how so enormous a body could move at all, let alone with such celerity. Fat surrounded him on all sides, plastering layer upon layer of superfluous flesh wherever it would hang most ponderously. His cheeks, now blotched and scarlet, hung looped like curtains upon a stage, drawn apart sufficiently to disclose the vulgar *tableau* of his nose and mouth. His eyes, hedged in between frosty brows and ruddy

cheeks, seemed craftier than ever; though the further they were forced to retreat from the common view, the brighter the ironical gleam that they enclosed.

When a blemish can no longer be concealed, then is the time to be most proud of it, and to hear Sir John expounding on his own stomach one would have thought that the whole object of his life had been to bestow upon it that preposterous girth. He was not content to have other people comment on it, but had perforce to protrude it into conversation himself. He loved best to hear abuse from the Prince, and every foul comparison that dropped from those youthful lips was cherished by him as a pearl of price, so that his corpulence became proverbial in Eastcheap, and a superstition endured, even long after his death, that all fat men were merry men, and that thin men were usually to be despised.

Sitting in his Dauphin chamber he encouraged the Prince in loose speech, loose ways, and fast and loose expenditure; and it would have exasperated Henry Percy, who had such uphill work with his education, to see how quickly the young Prince ran downhill at one push from those gouty fingers. Falstaff rejoiced. The boy was a boy after his own heart, and he would mould him to be a man after his own fashion.

He could not know how deeply the father's spirit was instilled in the son's heart of hearts, for the crown's doom already oppressed the heir to the crown, however little such heaviness might appear on the surface.

A time to work,
And a time to play,
A time to swear,
And a time to pray,

said Henry Monmouth's conscience; and just now he would play, play with all his might and mind, as all his life he put into whatever he was doing the whole concentration of the moment. But being a boy, he was secret as a boy, and shared his conscience with no one; though his father and his school-friend and his boon companion each thought that they knew at least a part of it.

Sir John could not know either that his own old heart was playing traitor to him, in giving its allegiance to Prince Harry. He would have been scornful at the mere thought of such a thing. He loved the boy, he told himself, as he loved all objects which contributed to his pleasure. But unlike other pleasures, he could never have a surfeit of Prince Harry: the sound of his young foot on the stair, of his young voice in the courtyard, the sight of his young and glowing face, were delights which never could wax old, or wane....

They went about so much together that at last the friendship was noised abroad out of the purlieus of Eastcheap across the green fields to Westminster, and there a haggard King, for ever poring over I.O.U.'s, listened to yet one more piece of unsavoury gossip from the lips of the Lord Chief Justice.

"Yes, but Gascoigne, what am I to do?" he said. "The boy's as obstinate as the devil. He swears

he is of age now, and may choose what friends he likes!"

He frowned, staring down unseeing at the quill pen in his hands. He looked already wearied out with the troubles which had always weighed upon him, but which now were coming to a head in the combined rebellion of the Percys and of their late enemies Glendower and the Douglas.

"It's bitter," he said, "when one's own flesh and blood rebels, as well."

"There's only one solution, Henry. Give the boy a responsible position when you go against the Percys. Henry Percy gave him a good military education whatever else he lacks."

"If I do, it will save the cost of another salary, that's one thing," agreed the King. He sat thoughtfully, still looking at the papers before him. "I'm disappointed in Harry, Gascoigne," he said.

"I don't think you understand him," said the Lord Chief Justice.

"Does a father *ever* understand his sons?"

"Better than you do, Harry, at any rate. Just because he's as obstinate as the devil it's no good threatening him with hell-fire. You've probably tried to put him off that old rascal before now ——"

"Put him off!" The King smiled bitterly. "I've used most of my inadequate vocabulary to that effect," he said.

"Exactly, and all you've done is to drive him to villainy the faster. He's naturally arrogant, as you were at his age, and being heir to the throne has doubled his reserves of arrogance. 'The Prince can do no wrong,' you know."

"The King can do no right — that's the lesson *I've* been learning," said Henry Bolingbroke. He twisted the pen in his hands. Already his thoughts had wandered to more mercenary matters, for there was ten thousand pounds to be borrowed, and he had no idea from where he was to get it. . . .

"I was saying," said the Lord Chief Justice, "that we'd better leave Harry alone for a bit, and see what we can do with Falstaff — but we shall have to be careful. If we take serious measures against the man we may only succeed in giving him board and lodgings at the Crown's expense, and in alienating Harry's affections from *you* altogether. That risk would be too great to undertake."

"It is *I* who am the alien," said the King, "in a country combined to destroy me."

The Lord Chief Justice rose to his feet. "I'm sorry," he said, "that you're too preoccupied to listen. Perhaps I had better take what steps seem best to myself in this affair. Do you trust me?"

"Absolutely," said Henry Bolingbroke. Gascoigne bowed and withdrew. It was a short answer to his question, but the dignity and sincerity of it touched him.

Alone in his chamber the King still sat, staring unseeing down at his pen, and at the maze of figures under it. How Harry could be so *contemptible* — that was what worried him; how he could show such utterly bad *taste*. . . .

"The Lord Mayor," announced a servant.

"Oh, my dear Lord Mayor," said the King, with a sinking in his heart, "how are you?"

"Nicely, thank you," said the Lord Mayor. "I

hope I haven't disturbed Your Majesty. It's touching that little matter of what I lent you two years ago, come Childermas."

14

So the King sent for his son, and made him second-in-command under himself. And the Lord Chief Justice sent for Falstaff, that he might lay his misdeeds bare before him, and Falstaff did not come. He was busy inventing a confidence trick which, if properly rehearsed, might bring him in a welcome addition to his income.

It was only when the Prince sent for him, that he went, and discovered that he had been put in charge of a foot regiment, and must be prepared to march at once.

Then there was weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth at the Boar's Head. Suppose Sir John died on the journey of a heart attack! Mrs. Quickly pressed upon him several hot drinks of holy thistle before he started. Suppose he was actually killed in battle! Against that fate she could offer no remedy, and so she wept copiously, both because she still loved him, and because she saw her chance of ever being repaid growing immeasurably less. Rebels were not like ordinary enemies. They would have no scruple about stabbing Sir John in the back — and Sir John's back offered such a target for stabs! She could not bear to think of it, so she kissed his hands over and over again and clung to his stirrup. Upstairs her husband lay dying, after having so long been half-alive, but he was left lonely

and forgotten now, while the whole household turned out to give the knight a good send-off.

"God bless Sir John Falstaff and the Prince of Wales!" they shouted, waving hands and handkerchiefs and caps and aprons as long as he was in sight, and drinking his health in sack afterwards, as they stood about in groups, discussing the new campaign.

While upstairs poor host Quickly coughed himself to death, and no one gave heed to him, or indeed even heard him.

15

Sir John had an infallible recipe for preserving his life during battle, and that was to arrive on the scene too late for actual participation. This had served him very well at Limoges, and on the Welsh marches, and he continued to use the same recipe now. All along the road enraged captains waited hour after hour for Sir John Falstaff, having been ordered to give him information, or to take information from him; and hour after hour Sir John dilly-dallied, wherever a hearty meal or a pretty figure caught his fancy. Even in times of peace travel by road was so precarious that any excuse for lateness had to be accepted; but now that war had disorganized the still nebulous organizations of peace, who should call *him* to account for a matter of five minutes' loitering on the way? It would have been useless to tell him that in *his* day battles were lost or won far less by manœuvring and archery than by the punctuality or unpunctuality of relief troops, al-

though such was the case. When a man surrenders all to Fate no sense of patriotism can be aroused in him, and Sir John lived in a state of perpetual and cheerful surrender to that enemy of ordered life.

So he dawdled in every town on his way up North, demobilizing his regular conscripted men on payment of a consideration, and filling their vacant places with any riff-raff he could conjure up. It was an open question whether such starveling creatures would ever manage to crawl to the scene of battle, a fact which Sir John thoroughly appreciated. He was in no hurry to meet Henry Percy when his blood was up, or yet old Northumberland or Glendower or the Douglas. He was convinced that his own side was going to lose in this particular encounter, so that was yet another reason for arriving even later than usual.

His regiment was a disgrace, as he himself was the first to admit. With that happy knack he had of entirely dissociating himself from unpleasant things, he regarded his soldiers as mere excrescences with which he personally was not concerned. They walked, as he said, "wide between the legs," as though they still wore prison chains, and they were pock-marked and filthy. Beside them, Bardolph and Pistol and Nym were model soldiers. They, too, would not march *with* the regiment, though they were forced to march ahead of it.

"Hark, hark, the dogs do bark,
The beggars are coming to town,"

quoted Bardolph, as they straggled into Coventry. Sir John had preceded them on horseback and was

by now safely ensconced within some inn, and as his foot regiment drew near it was just as Bardolph said. Every cur set up a furious barking, housewives scurried out to snatch up their drying-linen from the hedges, and children burst into screams of terror. Bardolph, Pistol and Nym set their teeth and marched doggedly on, followed at heel by the wretched foot regiment — three musketeers who, shameless until now, were actually beginning to feel ashamed. They were hungry and tired, too, but they knew they must not camp till they were the other side of the town. Occasionally a bucket of slops deluged them from the windows above, and shrill voices shouted abuse after them. Shop windows were shuttered as if against the plague.

When they had camped for the night on a site which the very gypsies had quitted after taking one look at them, they grumbled together.

"Shall we desert?" they said. But no, they could not desert. They were bound to Sir John, by no tie either of law or of love, but by the most fantastic of any of his promises — that of payment. For they were amazingly credulous.

Perhaps they believed that there was honour among thieves.

16

The battle of Shrewsbury was a victory for the King, to everybody's surprise. Henry Percy was slain in it, and many notable prisoners were taken. The King himself fought gallantly, and the Prince of Wales was blooded by a temple wound, which was

quite fitting, as it was his first real battle; a battle worthy of the name, where seven thousand dead lay cumbering the hills and valleys. . . .

Henry Bolingbroke may well have heaved a sigh of relief. He had wanted compromise instead of conflict, and yet, now that the conflict was over, Henry Percy was dead, and Henry Bolingbroke had won. Perhaps he might even have hoped this was an achievement not only of arms. . . . Even the sight of Sir John Falstaff, newly arrived and striding about amongst the wounded as if it were all his doing, moved him only to the faintest of faint smiles. The Fates had been magnanimous to him, and he in his turn could afford to be magnanimous.

Then he turned his back, and went into the royal tent, and kissed his eldest son.

"You did very well, Harry," he said, "and your fat friend must bear a charmed life. He hasn't even a scratch."

The Prince was sitting on the edge of the improvised bed with his elbows on his knees, and his chin in his hands. He had just been taken out of his armour, and his head was bandaged. He scowled up, under the bandages, at his father's remark.

"He's a remarkable character," he said, "and when I'm king I shall give him a position worthy of his abilities. . . ."

"Yes. *When.*" The King was still smiling, but in his heart he was afraid. "Oh, God," he prayed inwardly, "don't let me put the boy against me. Don't let him make a fool of himself, for Thy sake, amen."

He was a shy man, but he forced himself to

sit down upon the bed, beside the boy. Within the tent, that circle of secluded ground, everything was hushed and dumb. Even the aftermath of battle came in at the tent's flap, faintly. The air was stuffy, and smelt of trampled grass, and a field-mouse was running round and round the edge of the taut canvas, squeaking as it tried to find an exit. Neither spoke. They were both mortally tired, sitting side by side with their elbows on their knees and their chins in their hands; but even their weariness was not sufficient to break down the barrier of shyness between them. At last: "Does the wound trouble you?" the King asked.

"Of course not, father," the boy flung back impatiently, "it was only a scratch." Always that testy voice, thought Henry Bolingbroke — always that irritable protesting note, when he said "Father," almost as if the word were a rebuke. He shut his eyes. He was trying to remember whether he had addressed his *own* father like that. The field-mouse squeaked, sitting up on tiny haunches and staring at the two men with bright eyes. . . . "I must go on speaking," thought the King, "or I shall have to get up and go out. I shan't have a chance like this again."

"Well, I hope it's been washed properly," he said. "If a scratch gets dirt into it, it may turn into quite an ugly affair." He put his arm round the boy's slight shoulders, and at the same instant he felt him stiffen at the contact, as once *he* had stiffened at contact with Mowbray. "Good God, how alike we are!" he thought. "How is it there's no

confidence between us?" Aloud he said, gently and clearly:

"You see, it's a matter of contamination. You may think it's nothing at the moment, and then find afterwards that the dirt *has* got into it, and that the poison is affecting your whole system. . . . It's like your relationship with that fellow, Harry." Again the stiffening, the drawing-away movement. He went on quickly: "I know you won't take advice. You're headstrong, foolish — and you're still Prince of Wales. It's later on that I'm worrying about, when you have got greater responsibilities, bigger publicity." (And his inner self said, "He's not listening. He's watching that field-mouse in the corner. You're talking to thin air, Henry Bolingbroke.") Though it was still more of an effort to continue, to break the thick suffocating silence, he forced himself. He could not turn back, now.

"Don't you *see,* Harry," he said, "I'm not saying this for *myself.* I'm not asking you to do anything for *my* sake, but for the country's."

("Slow music!" mocked his inner self. "Bring out the handkerchiefs. Let's all have a thoroughly good cry together, shall we?")

He gripped his son's shoulder. "I've had a hard time as a king," he said, "I wonder if you've thought of that at all. I came at a time when the country was sick for need of good government. I've done *nothing* until to-day, which could be called more than seeing her out of convalescence. You'll have an easier time, and I'm glad of that. I don't want you to spoil your prospects. I want you to be

remembered," he said, "as a king England held worthy of remembrance."

He felt, in the silence that ensued, as if every word he had uttered had fallen heavily to earth, as if the trampled grass there had taken resonance and meaning and all, stifling everything under its own rank stuffiness. The young shoulders did not relax as he removed his arm from them. The sullen young face did not listen. Henry Bolingbroke stood up.

"I'll just let that little beggar out," he said, and bending, lifted the taut canvas at the edge of the tent. The field-mouse was gone suddenly, swallowed up in the blackness outside.

When Henry Monmouth raised his eyes again, his father had gone.

Chapter VII

Winter Snow

I

Henry Percy's head hung on London Bridge for a month, as proof of his death and as a warning to all traitors. Sir John, sitting at ease in his Dauphin window, could just see the pole which held it, and the shrivelled thing that topped the pole. The sight filled him with self-righteousness.

"Half my age and twice as wicked," he told Mrs. Quickly. "When I am in office there won't be enough poles on the bridge to hold all the heads *I* shall cut off!"

"Who says you will ever be in office, Sir John?" she parried.

"The Prince does."

That had grown to be a favourite retort of his. He was always leading people on by boasting, these days, and then using the name of the Prince to scare them off. But some of the bolder spirits demurred. "He's a grand lad," they said, "but he promises so many things. He promised Francis here, a thousand pounds. Why should he do everything he says he

will do, for you?" And then Sir John would join in the laugh against him, as if he really knew all the time that the Prince was joking, and didn't believe him in the least.

But he *did* believe him, that was the trouble. He tried not to think about it, or to listen to the Prince when he came to the tavern, promising, always promising the great things he would do when he was king. Harry used to sit there, swaying backwards and forwards on a common three-legged stool, his long legs thrust outwards in their riding-boots, his dark head tilted back on his long neck, with a mug in one hand and the whole world, theoretically, in the other. He talked and he talked. Nobody Sir John ever knew had been so spendthrift of words, except Sir John himself. And he in his turn sat facing the boy, his enormous mass squeezed somehow within the narrow compass of a chair, his pale-blue eyes twinkling ironically at the Prince, over the rim of his mug. And when the Prince paused for breath, Sir John would open his mouth, and with one obscene word bring all the royal hare-brained schemes tumbling to the ground.

To spend one's leisure hours like that was heaven on earth. And it was heaven on earth too, to be up and doing with the Prince, always at some fresh escapade. But when Sir John was alone his temptations began; then he suspected with good reason that his own heart had played him false.

For it had, and at last he knew it had, though he still strove to hide the truth from himself. In the continual battle between head and heart, head

had at last been vanquished. Sir John was in love, for the first and last time in his life.

There was nothing impure in his affections, and if anything that made him almost more ashamed. He would have known how to cope with himself then. As a boy himself he had been cherry-cheeked, and the position of a page was not without its perils. He remembered grimly how *he* had dealt with amorous old men. But *his* love was pure, almost embarrassingly pure. He asked nothing more of Harry than his presence, his young, lovely, endearing presence. It was enough to be with him, near him, to breathe the same air, be heated by the same sun, cooled by the same shadows, washed by the same rain. He groaned inwardly, thinking of these things, and the shifting of his mountainous stomach produced an earthquake in the bed. The Thames was crooning under his window, a repetitive serenade, as the water lapped continuously against the walls, swollen with the rising tide. "Harry, Harry, Harry," it crooned.

Sir John groaned outwardly. The Thames was playing traitor. Soon the whole world would know his secret, would tear it out of the hiding-place in his breast, exhibit it, poke it and prod it with scornful fingers, and laugh it to very scorn. When Sara, Abram's wife, was an hundred years old, and God had told her she should conceive, *she* had laughed too. "Shall it be again with me," she said, "after the manner of women?" It was a miracle, and a miracle had happened to Sir John too, for he at the ripe age of seventy had conceived this tender nurseling of a passion, and now it lay in his breast, safe just

as long as it was secret. . . . "Harry, Harry!" the water rippled, rising with the flood tide, yearning, aching, throbbing. Sir John put his head under the sheets. He could not bear it. He would not believe it. His self-respect *could* not be shattered so. He loved the boy, he told himself, simply for what he could get out of him — because he was Prince of Wales. Take away his position, and would he care one snap of the fingers for him? *Never!*

Harry . . . Harry . . . Harry. . . .

2

As if to assert his own authority, Harry Monmouth left his father's palace altogether and went to live in Eastcheap with Ned Poins, at a house called Coldharbour. The place was really a mere *pied-à-terre,* filled with idle and unscrupulous servants, and he and Ned Poins were hardly ever at home, though every tavern on the north side of the river could have put the royal crest above its bush — sign of good wines within.

Sometimes, too, he escaped Ned Poins and was off alone with Falstaff, bent on some private mischief. And sometimes he escaped from both of them, returning like some prince of enchantment to the more workaday world of Westminster, to see his father, to act as Privy Councillor, to give advice or to go on active service as a soldier. He worked well and swiftly, but they could never prevail upon him to stay when his work was done. Almost before they were aware of it he was on horseback again and riding posthaste to Windsor, or Wales, or Epping, or

St. Alban's, or Eastcheap. Even his uncles the Chancellor and the Bishop of Winchester could no longer control so slippery a nephew, but they smiled and shrugged their shoulders.

"He is young," they said. "We were young ourselves, once. This madcap phase will pass."

Finding that they tolerated the Prince's behaviour, Henry Bolingbroke's resentment against them increased. A king himself, he began at last to realize how Richard must have felt as king — utterly alone, with a crowd of friendly enemies about him. He could trust nobody. No sooner had he released old Northumberland than the man had begun again to plot against the throne; even his own son acknowledged no allegiance.

It seemed to Henry that after all he had not slain any rebels at Shrewsbury, but had only, like Jason, sown the dragon's teeth from which serried ranks of rebels were afterwards to spring, as they now sprang up, in Yorkshire. The Archbishop of York himself was on their side, to accuse him of causing the very misery and unrest he had spent his reign in trying to alleviate. These were hard thoughts, and they bit like iron into Henry's heart, inuring it this time against all conciliation. He had tried to conciliate clergy and lords and commons, and clergy and lords and commons hated him. Very well, *this* time he would give them some cause for hatred!

And because his son Harry was intractable and proud he sent his son John against Northumberland, and Archbishop Scrope and the second Mowbray.

3

Harry Monmouth had grown a great deal since Shrewsbury. In his twentieth year he was tall, proud of bearing, and he wore his dark hair cropped close like a priest's, in the fashion of all young nobles of the day. No one of his features was significant of itself, but his whole countenance was full of sweetness and light, and there was still about him that impression of sea-water cleanliness which had been Sir John's first thought. He was graceful, motionless or moving, not because he was willowy, but because he was strong and healthy. And he was lovely to look upon because he was young, because his skin was clear and his eyes were bright, and because of the peculiar graciousness of his whole person. He held himself as naturally and inevitably as a flower upon its stalk, lithe, vigorous, upstanding; and royalty, which seems always to confer some especial charm upon its children, had showered charms upon him, so that he could not do the simplest action but it seemed as if here bestowing some favour, nor surrender to ceremony except to make ceremony appear an act of everyday. London adored him, and he knew that London adored him. She had made him free of all her favours. He was the darling whom the gods would spoil with kindness, but he remained *un*spoilt; and his crowning perfection, in the eyes of all his subjects, lay in his *im*perfections, his light loving and heavy drinking, his gaming and profanity, his waywardness of speech and action, his very independability.

For transient things are always precious to us:

thistledown, rainbows, bubbles, bird-song, cloudy castles of the air. Holding least of mortality, yet they seem most mortal, because our mortal hands cannot grasp them, to have and to hold. Prince Harry had this transient quality, despite his flesh and blood, and it made him all the more bewildering to his contemporaries. Here, there and everywhere, he was as brilliant and flickering as a flame, close to scorching one minute, extinguished the next. If he had always held himself aloof, perhaps this waywardness would have gone unnoticed. But he could make himself so near and dear, nestling confidingly against one's heart like a child; and then he would be gone, vanished. . . . In that way he could not help but leave a vacuum behind him, for he could still fill only one place at a time, and while he was in Eastcheap his father mourned him at Westminster, and while he was in Westminster Sir John mourned him at Eastcheap.

Though everyone down to the pantry-boy at the Boar's Head missed his lively presence, Sir John missed him most of all — and sought to hide it most of all. Was it not part of his shameful secret, and as such, to be suppressed? So he was always most active in the Prince's absence, and used then to live at such a speed that his three retainers found it almost impossible to keep up with him.

He was suddenly afraid, that was the trouble. The insidious arguments of old had reappeared in far more threatening guise, for now they attacked, not himself, but another *through* himself. He was afraid to lose the Prince. Death seemed fearful, inevitable, not for him, but for his darling. "As a

flower of the field, so he flourisheth. . . ." Yes, as a flower, beautiful but mortal. The thought oppressed him, and on his wanderings he found that he could no longer pass a graveyard, for what the monks called Paradise Row offered no hope of Paradise to him.

He used to find himself wondering, as he walked, about a future life. In his youth he had tolerated the beliefs of the Church with the same kindly tolerance he had extended to fairy stories, and had accepted its veracity as little. His body was there. He could see it and feel it, as a channel both of pleasure and pain, but he had only the Church's word for the existence of his soul, and he accepted the verbal authority of neither man nor institution. His creed had been to live gloriously and fully, for as long as possible, and then to enter without regret into the oblivion which awaited him.

But love, which moves mountains, changes creeds as well, and the soul as a possible entity now appeared on John Falstaff's horizon, dimly at first, but enlarging fearfully and wonderfully every day, until at last, with a crash, he believed. No relief attended this awakening. He saw his soul bearing down upon him, starved, emaciated for want of food and exercise, trailing behind it no clouds of glory, but the doom of a perpetual damnation. Immortality was his. Heaven frowned upon him from above. Hell yawned wide for him below. All earthly bliss was gone for ever. He could not die — misery far above all other miseries, HE COULD NOT DIE! He would be called to account before the heavenly

courts, and the excuses that availed him in Eastcheap would never deceive the Just One. He would be cast into hell-fire, and burn there for ever and ever.

But there is an ecstasy in all torment, though it is only the stinging sweetness of unshed tears, and in the immortal night ahead of him Sir John beheld one gleam of hope. If he lived for ever, he could at least love for ever. He could remember the Prince. Thrown for ever from the tongue of one infernal flame to another, like a ball balanced on a jet of water, his too-inflammable body would remain for ever unconsumed; but he could remember the Prince. Though a thirst like no thirst he had yet experienced should make him cry aloud for water — and it would be a hellish thirst indeed desired water to quench it — he would forget it all in remembering the Prince. . . . He smiled through his tears and determined to spend all that night in prayer, an act of which the Prince would have said, when the time for it arrived, that "desire outlived performance."

On other days his conscience showed a bolder front, and he scorned all thoughts of immortality; but even in this state of mind he was still afraid for the Prince, afraid that he would fall ill, be wounded in battle, and die, afraid that he would never see him any more, the boy who had become the light of his eyes, the brimming cup of his delight, whose footsteps, coming or going, determined the very tempo of his heart-beats.

It was lucky for Sir John that he never thought of losing the Prince, except by death.

4

FORTUNE gave but one hostage to Henry Bolingbroke in all the years of his kingship, and that was the capture of the King of Scotland's son when he had set sail for France. While this kept Scotland quiet, civil war prevented France from considering hostilities outside her own frontiers, and Wales seemed content at the moment to rest upon her laurels, though Glendower was still at large.

In York, the King had fulfilled his threat. Treachery had been his portion ever since he could remember, and it was treachery that he dealt out now to these last and least of rebels. Effecting their dispersal by suggesting compromise, he then arrested Scrope and Mowbray, and the heads of the duke and the bishop fell together into a sawdust that knew no distinction between profane and sacred blood. But it was the first time the latter had been shed officially in England, and whatever the opinion of the people might be about the extravagances of the clergy, it was one thing to protest in Parliament, and to draw up plans for a redistribution of the Church's wealth, and quite another to punish a bishop as if he were a man like other men. Where was the benefit of clergy in that? They growled with fury and crowded round the bishop's tomb, waiting for the indignant and innocent dead to effect the unique cures of which he alone was suddenly made capable.

And if dead Bishop Scrope could bless with miracles, as they all declared he did, he could also curse, and the ghostly hand of malediction stretched

down from the north and hovered over Westminster. Swiftly after that the news travelled to grateful ears: "The King is ill! The King is ill!" and heads nodded in appreciation of a justice not too long deferred. The actual disease itself was unknown outside the palace, but the doctors shook their heads over it, and assured the King, after examination, that he had every symptom of leprosy.

The King laughed: "To have prided myself upon fastidiousness all my life, and then to fall sick of the filthiest disease," he said. "Why, even my son has not got leprosy!"

For in his latter days he did not know of which he was more ashamed, his sickness or his eldest son. Harry had gone against him in all things. He still flouted his authority, lived in thieves' kitchens, and delighted to disobey him. And now his behaviour, coupled with this shameful death penalty, seemed to Henry the climax of an arduous reign, spent in striving unsuccessfully against too many enemies. He had never been really successful as a king, as a father, as a man. Richard's death lay at his door, and Scrope's and Mowbray's, yet in return for their deaths he had brought no new spirit to life. He had sacrificed himself for the good of his country and his country trampled on him. In trying to please everybody he had succeeded, as always, in pleasing nobody whatever.

And yet Harry, who sought to please nobody but his own vain self, succeeded in pleasing the whole world.... It was curious. There must be some explanation of it. And the less of a king and the more of a leper he became, Henry Bolingbroke in

his enforced isolation was able to ponder upon that as well as many other things.

The age was a transitionary one: with the new century a new and ardent spirit was informing England, although it is difficult to believe that she could have recovered so quickly from the civil wars which had been harrying her countryside and emptying her coffers for so long. But where the wounds are surface scratches, the body soon recovers, and truly civil war had done little more than scratch the surface of English earth. The heart remained untouched.

For there was as yet no such thing as national unity. In a time when news travelled so slowly that the great mass of the country people were often a king behind in their calculations, and knew little more even of that king than his name, it was impossible for real unity to exist. The three great powers of church and lords and commons were so divided that they were less a holy trinity than an eternal triangle. The old institutions had failed the people. The Church had failed them, because it had failed itself. Parliament had failed them, because it had failed to work the miracles they expected. The lords, as a body, had failed them, because they were a body torn asunder by civil dissensions and party strife.

Only the great class of the merchants had not failed. Year by year they had drawn closer together, strengthening their guilds, consolidating their resources, gaining a steady and increasing influence over every form of civil life. The hand that held the purse-strings was beginning even then to rule

the world. Though the merchants were still almost of mushroom growth, they were wealthy, and, what was more, willing to invest their wealth in adventurous enterprises. They did not secrete themselves in back rooms as the Jews had done in the olden days, until forced loans were extracted from them; but they came out boldly into the daylight, and were made lord mayors and town councillors, and nobody could say them yea or nay. During the last reign and the present one their money had been bit by bit accumulating, and now it was beginning to burn holes in their pockets. They were not interested in party quarrels, but they looked over the sea and saw the rich French coast-line, paradise lost and paradise waiting to be regained — gateway not only to the Continent but to the whole flat world. For a war which would provide fresh markets for their goods they were prepared to lend without stint. When they could tear their eyes from France they turned them not upon the King, but upon the Prince of Wales. Then they winked cheerfully at one another,

"You wait till *he* comes to the throne," they said. "*Then* we shall have some fun!"

So it was that the desire of one group of people came gradually to influence the mass — for by now the merchants carried more weight than the impoverished and irritated nobles, or the Church, preoccupied with her own affairs. Here were people who looked ahead into the future, imperialist, empire-builders, who with British yewbows and British steel were out to prove, at no far distant date, that British goods were best.

But during Henry Bolingbroke's last years they went about their business quietly, waiting, only waiting for the new Harry to be crowned to call him conquering hero, and to pave the way with gold to make him one. . . .

Meanwhile, the country stirred uneasily, a dragon awaking from a sleep whose dreams had hardly been disturbed by Shrewsbury or Bramham Moor, but who now was 'ware and waking for a war deserving of the name.

5

BECAUSE of his valiant assistance at Shrewsbury (testimony of which was given by the Prince of Wales himself), Sir John Falstaff afterwards found his services much in demand, and, while the rebels under Northumberland were planning fresh mischief, the good knight was travelling the Southern counties, well out of the danger zone, pressing men into the King's buckram. He did this as an afterthought, making his real business the renewing of acquaintanceship with the many county folk he had met in his long life, seeking, whenever possible, to get board and lodging from them, thus saving the modest competence allowed him for this purpose by the crown.

He enjoyed himself. It was an ample and leisurely life, providing compulsory audiences and ample scope for sarcasm and abuse. Though Nym was serving time for some offence, Pistol and Bardolph were still his followers, and a page called Robin, presented to Sir John by the Prince. Sir John

mistrusted Robin. He was too young to be crafty, yet he looked so innocent that Sir John felt all the wiles of the devil must be hidden in him. Perhaps this was the first sign of age in the knight — that craftiness in the very young put him at a disadvantage. He felt that he could still hold his own with any man, but no longer with children. And although the boy was the Prince's gift Sir John valued him no more for that. He knew that the skinny imp added yet more emphasis to his own bulk, and needed to find no further reasons for his presentation.

He missed Harry bitterly, but even had he stayed in London he would not have seen him, for since the King's illness Harry had been immersed in state affairs, and his visits to the Boar's Head had grown fewer and farther between. Sometimes — as when he sent the boy — he found time to remember his old friend, or to send an abusive affectionate scrawl with Bardolph as postman. And he still promised, as fulsomely as ever, that when he was a free agent he would come back again, and sit in the Dauphin chamber, and drink from the parcel-gilt goblet, Mrs. Quickly's last remnant of the inn's former glory.

For it was the sad truth: the Boar's Head was sinking lower and lower every year. When Sir John was in residence, a sort of shabby radiance returned to hang for a while about the clouded windows and decrepit walls. The old stone sign of the Boar's Head had fallen from position long ago, and was now used as a lid to the bread-pan — the only thing heavy enough to resist the swarms of black rats that came nightly up from the river banks.

Even the Prince's visits could not redeem the inn. He had made his presence common through all Eastcheap, and the Boar's Head had had no more of him than the other inns. But the Boar's Head had been built two hundred years before, when gentlemen who *were* gentlemen came to stay, and when the common crowd penetrated, even with bared heads, no further than the porch under the bush. Now conditions were changed, and its old rooms rang with the drunken laughter of knaves and fools. Even the sanctity of the Dauphin chamber — where once the French Crown Prince himself had stayed — had been violated, no longer only by Sir John, but by a crowd of common bawds who took up residence there and plied their business.

Mrs. Quickly's scruples had lasted but a moment, and had vanished for ever when the first ready money crossed her hand. She still wept copiously at intervals, mourning her husband, or Sir John's absence, or even the decrepitude of the Boar's Head. But alas, the older she grew the fonder she became of her own commodities, and so she was seldom sober when these crying fits took her. At such times even Pistol seemed a kindred spirit, and she forgot how often she had called him swaggerer, leaning her crazy old head on his shoulder, while he, with one arm round her, picked her pocket. Then a coyness, more hard to bear with even than her crying, would envelop her, and she would push him playfully away, with:

"Fie — what would Sir John say?"

But Pistol's suggestions of Sir John's comments would take too long to relate here.

6

AFTER years of inaction a last spasm of action suddenly took the dying King. His disease, though wasting and wearisome, was not actually painful, and he now determined, employing all his will power, to accomplish that upon which he had set his mind. Alone in his palace during these last years, he had not been ignorant of the general intentions of the country, and he saw that, as soon as he was gone, a new and brilliant era would open up, with Fortune throwing recklessly upon young Harry all those favours which she had delighted to withhold from him. It was not fair. His country saw him useless, cast aside, a skeleton enthroned. Well, he would show them that they needn't wait until he was dead. He would give them the fighting that they longed for, and at the same time fulfil the prophecy which lingered like Delilah in his usually unsuperstitious mind. He would go to Jerusalem, and start a fresh crusade there, and die there fighting honourably, as it had been said he should die in Jerusalem.

So in autumn, when Westminster was nothing but whirling leaves above, and rustling leaves below, blown over from the orchards beyond Horseferry Road, Henry Bolingbroke rose from his bed like a cured man, and hid his leprosy under bright armour, and, leaning heavily on his attendants, came out into the open air. Over his armour he wore the white surcoat and the blood-red cross. No one marked him much, as he travelled by litter to the Abbey, and he thought, "They are ashamed of me. They have forgotten that the Black Prince himself travelled

by litter once. I will make them proud, though, when once I reach Jerusalem. . . ."

The chill air was invigorating. The whirling leaves were no longer symbols of summer's end to him so much as live things blown about by the breath of God, still useful, even underfoot. He was alive, too. The armour was so heavy that he wondered if he would be able to stand later without support, but, he told himself, that was only because he had been so long out of harness. He would grow strong, soon. That very day, at the Abbey, he would implore the Virgin (who had given the holy oil to St. Thomas, and with which he had been anointed king) to intercede for him with God, to give him this last chance of regaining the affections of his people.

"You must understand," he would say to her. "They don't think of me at all, only of my son. . . ." But perhaps that wouldn't move her at all, because they had only thought of *her* Son, once, and she had been humble and unknown, and hadn't cared. . . .

His heart was beating painfully fast. He felt as if it were knocking at the portals of his wasted body, knocking against the armour, loudly, insistently, threateningly. There was a dizzy sound in his ears, as of people singing a long way off, whose voices veered with the wind, now near, now far. He set his teeth.

"If I am going to Jerusalem, and I *shall* go," he said to himself, "I must really control myself."

They helped him out of his litter, and into the Abbey. Within its shadows he removed his helmet, that no outsider should see the white mask-like thing

underneath. Then, when they had led him to the altar:

"Leave me," he said.

He staggered a little as they let go of his arms. Then he braced himself.

"Pull yourself together, Henry Bolingbroke," he said, and shut his eyes for the service of the dedication of arms which was about to begin.

Half an hour later he collapsed where he stood, and his attendants hurried him homewards, with a heart-beat so uncertain and a pulse so faint that it seemed it was a dead man that they carried between them.

He survived the stroke five months, but he did not leave his bed again, and the Jerusalem that he died in was the chamber in the palace known by that name.

7

DING-DANG-DONG dingle-dangle--DONG! ding-dang-dong dingle-dangle-DONG! The bells which had slowly tolled the death of Henry Bolingbroke rang out a delirious jangle of joy at the coronation of his son. It was Passion Sunday, and the crowds that thronged the city made thorough holiday of the occasion. Flags and pennants from every edifice streamed quivering outwards in the radiant April air, and in every window a crowd of spectators gathered to watch the procession and the crowds below.

The crowd in the Strand was a good-natured one, and nearly every person held a pinafore of a struggling child in one hand, an onion, garlic, or some

such savoury vegetable in the other, which he or she consumed raw with much enjoyment. Jugglers and contortionists, sweetmeat-sellers, quacks disposing of eternal life at threepence the packet, "Special reduction to-day, ladies and gentlemen!", pedlars and gypsies offered cheap entertainment to while away the time of waiting, and did good business.

But always in the crowd there was a smaller crowd, more interested in the person about whom they clustered than in any of the street performers. And in every case the centre of the group was a man, woman or child, who had, at some time or other

Spoken to,
Been spoken to,
Brushed against,
Fetched and carried for,
Held a horse for,
Crossed the shadow of,
Drank out of the same mug, or
Eaten off the same platter as, the King.

The King! Wonderful password to fame and fortune! To those who could turn imagination to account, money was now pouring in, as they disposed of countless odd shoes, caps, gloves, breeches, rings, saddles, mugs, plates, bed-linen and other articles which had, on their sworn solemn oath been used at one time or another by Prince Henry — beg pardon, 'is Majesty the King. Indeed, almost as many relics were passing from hand to hand at that coronation as had been recovered from the Crucifixion itself.

But there were some who had no relics to dispose of, but whose recollections still dripped like

honey into their listeners' ears. Sir John was one of these. Although handicapped by the fact that he was for once telling the truth, he had so varnished and embellished it that at last it had assumed the familiar preposterous outline of all his statements. . . . Close to his side stood Robert Shallow, now as feeble in the legs as in the head, though disconcertingly accurate about the sum of money still owed him by his friend. Mrs. Quickly had wanted to come and see King Harry too, but she dared not leave the Boar's Head for fear of robbery of its few contents in her absence. Bardolph and Pistol worked assiduously at their old business among the crowd, though whenever they caught Sir John's eye they looked hurriedly away. They were dreading the moment when they would have to try out the pea and the walnut-shells, for it was a confidence trick in which they had no confidence whatever. Robin the page had climbed up Queen Eleanor's monument and was occupied with the other boys in pelting the crowd with the refuse they had carried up with them in bags. But even that did not annoy the crowd. Boys would be boys, and it was Coronation day. They were so happy they could have stood there for ever, waiting for their King.

And Harry kept them waiting. Thorough as his father in all things, he had refused to hurry through the ceremony, taking each new garment as it was laid upon him as he would take up every task which fell to him thereafter, with a charming gravity of mien and purpose. And as he bent his comely head before the archbishop to receive the

crown, there was no single thought in that head unbecoming to a king. . . .

After the first hour of waiting, though the crowd was still good-natured, a certain amount of jostling had begun, and Sir John found himself carried forward with those about him, mere flotsam in a sea of bobbing heads. There seemed no reason for this drifting. It was a natural reaction, set in motion by the undercurrent of mob excitement. Farther and farther away from Queen Eleanor's cross Sir John was carried, protesting vainly, farther and farther from Robert Shallow, from the boy Robin, from Bardolph and Pistol. He felt as if his individuality was being squashed and squeezed out of him, swallowed up in the one great individuality of the crowd, as he was swallowed up himself. He could not assert himself, because everyone else was asserting himself. Everyone was pushing and elbowing and saying, "Here you, look out!" because everyone wanted to see the King. Yet they were all so cheerful, so pleasant, that was the devil of it. Pleasant, but impervious to flattery or abuse when it came to trying to get a better view. It was a long time since Sir John had felt so helpless, so unknown. . . .

Yet, as he drifted with the crowd one cheering thought came to him. Perhaps it would be better like this, after all — to call out "Harry!" and to see the boy turn towards him, him alone, without old Shallow pulling at his elbow, or Bardolph and Pistol breathing obsequiously down his neck. Then suddenly, at the magic moment, he would emerge, no longer part of the crowd, but a prophet who had not been honoured in their midst, but who would go

forward from that moment to be weighed down with more honours than he could hold.... He would not think of it.

He did not want to think of it, that was the extraordinary thing. Again the spell had fallen upon him at the prospect of seeing Harry, and he could think of nothing, *nothing,* but the dear lad himself. All mercenary intentions were stripped away. To see him. To be near him. To hear him speak again, after these months of separation!

"Damn you, sir, take your foot off my wife's skirt, will you?"

"Look, see the people down Whitehall! They're clearing the road now. Perhaps the service is over!"

"My wife couldn't come. She's lying in. If it's a boy we'll call it Harry."

Behind Sir John someone was suddenly and violently sick. Students from the Inns of Court were making a hideous noise with wooden rattles, and a nun had been hoisted up on to the shoulder of a stout drayman to get a better view. She looked frightened, clinging to the man's head with one hand, and to her rosary with the other. She was very young, and someone was tickling her ankles. "Oh, Mary," she prayed, under her breath. "Lead us not into temptation!" Sir John stared at her. Somewhere, some time, he had seen a face like that before, as sweet and as tormented.... In front of him a drunken spurrier was struggling with a soldier. He had lifted up his arm and struck the soldier across the face with his tongs. "Murderer!" he shrieked. The soldier's lip was cut and bleeding, but

he only tightened his grip on the spurrier's arm. "Come on, now, come on, now," he said....

Ding-dang-dong dingle-dangle-DONG, suddenly, rejoicingly, the Abbey bells rang out. And all over London, the churches took up the same rejoicing cry, Bow bells and Peter's and Paul's, St. Clement's and St. Bride's, All Hallows and Holy Trinity the Less. And with the bells a great roar of cheering rose up from the people, beginning at the Abbey, travelling like a tidal wave down Whitehall, and along the Strand, along the whole route to the Guildhall, where the King would make his way. It went on and on, spontaneously, overwhelmingly, increasing every moment in volume and intensity — a welcome more royal than any royalty had ever had before.

Sir John's tongue clove to the roof of his mouth, and his knees trembled beneath him. It was curious how the high peaks of his life had always had a crowd for background — York Fair, the battlefield at Poictiers, the burning of Fleance, and now this, the highest peak of all. For he felt instinctively that this was the last crowd in which he would ever take part....

As the royal procession neared Charing Cross the climax of excitement was reached. The King, surrounded by priests and prelates, was walking under a canopy, and only glimpses of him could be caught — glimpses enough to show that he *was* the King, the lovely boy that Eastcheap had taken to its heart.

Sir John, employing his stomach as a battering ram, forced his way forward. He was old, but for the nonce the strength of his youth returned, and he

was discharged finally with the velocity of a comet. For one moment he gaped at the King, as the crowd closed to behind him, filling his vacant place.

"Harry!" he said.

The King's eyes, raised a moment from the insignia of kingship that he carried, looked at him, through him, to the crowd behind, and the King said no word and never paused, but passed onwards, to be swallowed up again in the tumultuous cheering of the crowds in the Strand.

The same soldier who had dealt with the spurrier now nudged Sir John.

"Move back, please," he said, "move back."

Sir John, in a daze, obeyed. In that moment he had met his first and final defeat. For though the face that had been raised to his was the dear face of Harry Monmouth, they were the eyes of Henry Bolingbroke that had looked out from it, unseeing, uncaring, withdrawn.

8

THREE years later another crowd was cheering at Southampton, when the wind stood fair for France, filling the sails of King Harry's thousand ships. They rocked and pulled at their moorings, eager to be out to sea, to race one another across to hostile shores, there to disembark their dangerous cargo, later to return laden with prisoners and spoil. They were a lovely sight, cumbrous yet graceful, with their full swollen sails bearing them onwards. In the poop of the first ship stood the King, with his brothers and

cousins. In full armour, though bareheaded, he was staring ahead as if already he could discern a conquered land. *"Henricus D. G. rex Angliæ et Franciæ et Dominus Hiberniæ"* . . .

The salt spray saluted him, kissing his thin cheeks and his dark hair, and he could taste the rime on his lips and on the backs of his hands. An October sun overhead shone through the spray until it scintillated like a million priceless diadems, thrown up by the Tritons to do honour to a greater king than theirs. Harry Monmouth rejoiced. Wherever he looked there were crowns, crowns, crowns for the taking! He was proud of his soldiers. He was proud of his ships. He was trebly proud of the confidence of his country. Young, healthy, intelligent, he was unconquerable, and the French would find him so.

"On! On!" the wind whistled, lashing the sails, thrashing the ropes into a quivering intensity of action, and under its force the ship plunged and reared like an unruly horse taking a fence. "On! On!" groaned the sails, "though we split in bearing you thither — over the sea! Over the sea!"

Behind the King his relations stood in a respectful half-circle. A page behind the Duke of Lancaster was improving the shining hour by making faces at his reflection in his master's shining back, and one of the Beauforts was whispering to his neighbour: "I don't mind the *rolling,* at all. It's when she dips her snout under the waves and comes up spluttering that my nausea begins."

"On! On! On!" whistled the wind, returning like a fury, and the fleet of ships, which had slack-

ened for a little, leapt forward all together, straining towards their objective. High at the masthead the wind kept up a shrill commentary, urging them forwards. The King still stood in the prow, with his hands on the deck railings, a glittering spray-bestrewn figurehead for all to follow. He did not speak aloud at all, but once, "France," he said, under his breath.

Another ship was slowly drawing alongside the royal ship, a larger and bulkier vessel, whose sail was helped by thirty oars. She came lumbering up so closely that she almost scraped the king's ship, and the huge shadow of her lateen sail darkened the King's face. He withdrew his eyes from the invisible perspective, and looked at the rival ship. It was an old weather-beaten affair, tarred and patched and rust-coloured, with the mussels of a Mediterranean port still clinging to its sides. The sail, too, was rust-coloured, filled preposterously, so that the bulk beneath it was sent rollicking forward like a fat old man. A fat, drunken old rascal — that was what the ship was like. The King smiled. His brother touched him on the shoulder.

"Will you have this now?" he said.

The King took the proffered cup of claret, and tossed it off. "France!" he had said again, under his breath. But the prophetic wind above him was wiser. "Agincourt!" it shrilled, and the full sails heard it, and grew more full-blown, almost lifting the ships beneath them out of the water into the air, so swiftly they sped over the waves, carrying Harry and his long-bowmen to certain victory.

9

Sir John was dying. Comatose, enormous, he lay under Mrs. Quickly's best quilt, with his eyes shut, waiting for the end. The Dauphin chamber waited too, with patience and forbearance, that it might cleanse itself for ever after, of this common clay which had inhabited it. From the inn-yard outside a thousand sounds of everyday were wafted through the tiny window, gay with the bitter sight and odour of geraniums.... The day was summer's best attempt, with a sun reeling drunken-hot across the world, casting thick black shadows under every eave of every house, and in the corner of the meadow behind the inn the young calves were standing, oblivious of flies and sun, calling for their mothers. They sniffed at the grass at the foot of the gate uncomprehendingly, and raised dripping black muzzles again to dribble along the topmost bar. In the back porch of the Boar's Head a family of young ducklings piped their little tunes, running hither and thither like tiny yellow balls of thistledown, extraordinarily unanimous in word and deed. They paid no attention to their mother, who, penned into a barred hutch, called them continually.

A serving-girl, leaning from a window adjacent to Sir John's, shook out somebody else's quilt, as white as her own snowy-white arms and breast, and her lover below, looking up, called out some jocular phrase. She answered him, and they made an appointment to meet that night for the fair in St. Giles' fields.

Everything was young, in a young and growing

world. The old were cast off, discarded, like autumn leaves. But the good knight, silent in a room which was buzzing with tiny life, had no regrets. He had no wish to live any more. His day was over. And he was dying as he had always meant to die, free of charge, in somebody else's bed. . . . Throughout the day the tearful Mrs. Quickly had peeped and pried, to get a word or a look from him, but all to no purpose, and on the stairs the heavy feet of the faithful Bardolph could be heard continually mounting and dismounting.

They had asked him: "How do you feel, my captain?" waiting to see the sardonic old eyes open again, and the fat smile curve those ploughed cheeks. It was no good. He moved nothing, not even an eyelash, and they would have supposed him dead already but for the slightest movement of his stomach under the bedclothes, up and down, up and down.

He was not aware of them any more, that was the reason. He refused to credit their presence in his room. While his torpid dropsical old flesh cumbered the bed his mind was soaring in a greenwood with his beloved Harry. They two alone, and only they, riding, gliding through the world, through drifting green branches, swinging, singing skies, and drowsy noons. Their relationship was perfect, at last. Something had once happened to separate them, long, long ago . . . but now they were together again, lover and lover, friend and friend. There had never been a friendship like theirs in the world before, and never would be again, when they were gone. But *their* friendship would last for ever and ever. . . .

That was why, when the others came pressing about him, feeling his pulse, raising his eyelids, he gave no sign. He had forgotten them. Above him, as if looking down through peach-blossoms, was the golden laughing face of a boy, with a bloom on it that no peach ever had. "Harry. Harry . . ." he said, but no audible sound came from between the gross old lips, except a wheezy rattle in his throat, like a clock's pendulum settling down at last into a dusty and eternal stillness.

He lay all that day silent, and died at last as Mrs. Quickly had prophesied he would, "even at the turning of the tide."

THE END

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GAYE, P F
THE GOOD SIR JOHN

[redacted]

PLASTIC BOOK BADGE MUST REMAIN IN POCKET AT ALL TIMES. A FEE WILL BE CHARGED IF BADGE IS LOST.